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MEDIA RECEPTION, SEXUAL IDENTITY, AND PUBLIC SPACE

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MEDIA RECEPTION, SEXUAL IDENTITY, AND PUBLIC SPACE

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Media Reception, Sexuality Identity, and Public Space

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In an attempt to trace the ongoing process of forming and negotiating gay identities in response to historical events and media texts, this dissertation explores the intersections between gay men, media reception, and public space in relation to a number of historically and socially significant film and television texts: *Cruising* (1980), *Parting Glances* (1986), *Longtime Companion* (1990), *Philadelphia* (1993), and *Any Mother's Son* (1997). This dissertation examines these texts within the framework of historical materialist analysis, while incorporating the insights of cultural geography. These analyses demonstrate the importance of studying historical audiences while understanding audience members as not only media consumers, but social subjects located within social space who reflect upon, respond to, and adapt to the ways in which social space enables and constrains their politics, desires, memories, and affective experiences.

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Chapter One: Gay Male Film and Television Reception

I am concerned with media reception practices and their relationship to cultural, social, and political identities and struggles, and public spaces. I focus on how film, television, and the Internet simultaneously shape public space and foster gay male collective identities in the U.S. Rodger Streitmatter addresses similar concerns in relation to print media in his history of the lesbian and gay press. For example, he writes that *Vice Versa*, the first lesbian newspaper initially published in the U.S. in 1947, "launched a whole new medium of communication that has ultimately helped unify alienated readers while combating their oppression."[1] As prototype for the lesbian and gay press, the newspaper established several characteristics which are still reflected in the lesbian and gay press of today: it employed a "positive tone to counteract the way gay people saw themselves covered in American newspapers"; it published political views in the form of poetry and fiction which sought to "empower" lesbian readers; it opened its pages to other authors so that it became a forum for the issues facing lesbians and gay men; and it was "a venue for public discussions of topics the mainstream media ignored."[2] According to Streitmatter, this type of lesbian newspaper opened up several new opportunities for publicity or for generating public discourses about collective lesbian interests. For the first time, lesbian and gay readers could openly debate issues that had never been publicly discussed. It allowed writers whose ideas might not have made it into print in other papers the possibility to air their views. It provided a forum to

[1] Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 2.
[2] Streitmatter, 7-10.

educate the heterosexual population about the "realities" of lesbian experience. Finally, the newspaper cataloged and published resources available to lesbians "who were unsure of their sexual identity [and] had access to very little information about homosexuality."[3]

Streitmatter's research illustrates the potential the early lesbian press had in shaping collective identities in the U.S. after World War II. The gay and lesbian press has been critical to the development and on-going negotiation of queer collective identities and the creation of a "counterpublic sphere." I define "counterpublics," following Nancy Fraser, as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[4] Each of the following chapters situate media texts and gay male audiences within specific historically and materially constituted discursive and spatial fields in order to tease out the ways in which gay men forge a collective sense of self in relation to media texts. The print media, film, television, and the Internet produce not only texts but socio-spatial contexts. That is, print, film, and electronic media create an interactive environment in which queers dispersed over disparate locations can publicly and collectively engage in culturally, socially, and politically significant ways as counterpublics.

Each of the case studies that make up this dissertation is an example of historical materialist reception analysis. Historical materialist media reception focuses on the event of interpretation and seeks to explicate the historical reasons for the specific interpretive

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[3] Streitmatter, 12.

[4] Nancy Fraser," Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* Craig Calhoun, ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 116.

strategies film and television audiences actually employ.[5] Elizabeth Ellsworth's work on media reception and her notion of "discursive self production" is central to my project, as it highlights the ways in which queer identities emerge from viewer/text and viewer/viewer relationships and interpretive exchanges that typically involve some sort of "rejection and alteration" of dominant discourses.[6] Cultural geography examines the mutually constitutive relations between historical subjects and social space. The work of Henri Lefebvre in particular, with the attention he pays to "representational"—or lived—spaces, affect, and desire, proves useful here. I do, however, incorporate the insights of numerous cultural geographers into a historical materialist approach to media reception in order to answer the rather broad research question of how gay men have used film and television texts in the ongoing process of constructing and negotiating collective identities or counterpublics.

Because the specific interpretations of certain viewers shape each case study, they each refine and redirect that question in different ways. The second and third chapters attempt to account for the protests against the film *Cruising* (1980), without reducing the causes to the presumed homophobic representations of gay identity and homoerotic desire presented in the film. Chapters Four and Five seek to understand how AIDS films helped some viewers rethink gay identity and desire in the wake of HIV/AIDS while also examining why one AIDS film, *Parting Glances* (1986), came to be understood as "elegiac." Chapter Six looks at how viewers of *Any Mother's Son* (Lifetime, 1997) used

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[5] Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Film: Studies in the Historical Reception of America Cinema.* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1992), 81.
[6] Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and *Personal Best*," *Wide Angle* 8.2 (1986): 184.

the Internet in the process of engaging with and responding to the TV movie and to other viewers. Each particular case study also presents a specific socio-spatial problematic. In the case of *Cruising* it is necessary to explore the contradictions and tensions produced by the semi-public space of the gay "urban ghetto" and the relationship between cities and sexualities. Examining AIDS films requires an investigation of the ways in which the experience of massive personal losses and process of mourning shaped both consciousness and the material and imagined geographies of homoerotic desire. Describing the reception of *Any Mother's Son* entails thinking about the ways in which cable television and electronic media have reshaped public space and created the possibilities for other spaces and different kinds of social interaction and social bonds.

Discourses, identities, and desires are spatialized. Lefebvre reminds us that discourse is emitted from a particular space and that bodies and subjectivities are both shaped by and shape the spaces they occupy.[7] For Lefebvre, "each living body *is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space."[8] Roger Silverstone's approach to television relies on the insights of D.W. Winnicott for whom the social subject emerges in the "potential space" between the individual and the environment in relation to a transitional object.[9] It is here, in this potential space, that the subject acquires agency, attempts to fulfill its needs, and begins to master space. That process, however, is never complete, and the subject spends much of its life searching for "ontological security" through the appropriation of other transitional objects—such as

[7] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 132.
[8] Lefebvre, 170.
[9] Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9.

television—which help ground its experience of time and place and satisfy its needs and desires.[10] Lefebvre writes that space "is populated by visible crowds of objects and invisible crowds of needs."[11] Beyond needs—which, for Lefebvre, are relatively predictable and conform to the dictates of social space—are desires. "Our space has strange effects. For one thing, it unleashes desires."[12] Again, desires—while unruly and potentially disruptive—are produced and circulate within social space. These desires are what prevent "abstract"—or dominant—space from ever entirely achieving its aim of the homogenization of social space. The desires of "the fleshly body . . . the spatial body . . . and the social body . . . cannot live without generating, without producing, without creating *differences*."[13] While differences among the "users and inhabitants" of space have the potential to create truly differential spaces that disrupt and transform life under late capitalism, abstract space subsumes differences and, in the process, interpellates subjects within the dominant modes of production and reproduction. Against this totalizing view, other cultural geographers, such as Nigel Thrift, have suggested the importance of locality in cultural geography, as local contexts "produce different people with different capacities to think, to co-operate, to dominate, and to resist."[14] Nonetheless, space shapes bodies, desires, and subjectivities, and Steve Pile uses the term

[10] Silverstone, 10-12.
[11] Lefebvre, 394.
[12] Lefebvre, 97.
[13] Lefebvre, 396.
[14] Nigel Thrift, "Introduction to New Models of Civil Society," in *New Models in Geography: Volume 2*, Richard Peet and Nigel Thrift, eds. (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 153.

"body-ego-spaces" to suggest the ways in which subjects and spaces are simultaneously —though not unproblematically—mapped.[15]

Because film and television viewers approach media texts with bodies, identities, needs, and desires, we must consider them not only as viewers but also as users and inhabitants of particular social spaces. "Location" is a term often employed within the discourses of identity politics.[16] It should not, however, be understood to refer only to one's position in relation to socially constructed categories of identity such as race, socio-economic class, gender, and sexual preference or one's political stance in regard to various social and political concerns. Location also refers to the position one occupies within social space. Social subjects are inextricably tied to the spaces that they occupy and imagine. Historical viewers are social subjects—not implied viewers or spectators in the text or ideological effects of texts—and as such, to understand how they make use of film and television requires that we understand their relationship to social space. That relationship is seldom simple or untroubled.

Different authors have addressed the idea of the "problem of place" in different ways, although they typically point to the increasing lack of public space and informal public life as well as the blurring of the boundaries between public and private. Placelessness describes one of the central problems of abstract space for the users and inhabitants discussed by Lefebvre:

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[15] Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 209.

[16] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Elspeth Probyn, "Travels in the Postmodern," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 176-189. Liz Bondi, "Locating Identity Politics," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, Michael Keith and Steve Pile, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 84-101.

> Spaces are strange: homogeneous, rationalized, and as such constraining; yet at the same time, utterly dislocated. Formal boundaries are gone between town and country, between center and periphery, between suburbs and city centers, between the domain of automobiles and the domain of people. Between happiness and unhappiness for that matter. And yet . . . everything is separated, assigned in isolated fashion to unconnected 'sites' and 'tracts'.[17]

Abstract space has the effect of producing "'users' who cannot recognize themselves within it."[18] Edward Relph argues that contemporary experience is marked by a lost sense of belonging in space.[19] Joshua Meyrowitz has argued that electronic media have reorganized social space and detached it from physical place while also reordering social experience in a way that results in a "disconnectedness" or "no sense of place," even as the electronic media create new opportunities for connectedness.[20]

I have employed the idea of "placelessness" throughout this dissertation to suggest the different ways in which the experience of gay men is caught up in these problematic spaces. In fact, placelessness may have an especially profound impact on queers. Most queers are aware that space is "heterosexualized" in ways that often leaves them feeling displaced.[21] Along these lines, in Chapter Six, I explore Ray Oldenburg's misogynist and homophobic attempt to resurrect "great good places" as exclusively heterosexual spaces for male bonding as one example of the ways in which social space is often a geography of queer exclusion. Eric O. Clarke has chronicled the queer public sphere exclusion and explored the risks that attempts at queer inclusion presents. A

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[17] Lefebvre, 98.
[18] Lefebvre, 93.
[19] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London, Pion Limited, 1974).
[20] Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 23
[21] Gill Valentine, "Introduction," in *From Everywhere to Nowhere: Lesbian Geographies* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2000), 1-10.

historical response to heterosexualized space has been the creation of queer spaces: bars, bath houses, and other commercial venues, for example.[22] In major cities in the U.S. and elsewhere, these queer spaces have often coalesced into "gay ghettos." Gay ghettos, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, appeal to many gay men because of the promise of anonymity the city offers against the sometimes overly familiar and claustrophobic homes and communities they experience elsewhere, along with the possibility for "self-invention" within a queer milieu where "coming out" is less problematic.[23] The Internet, as discussed in Chapter Six, is another spatial environment in which queer self-invention and coming out are often encouraged.

MEDIA AND COUNTERPUBLIC SPHERES

Streitmatter's history of the lesbian and gay press recalls Benedict Anderson's discussion of the rise of print capitalism and the emergence of national consciousness in many ways. As Anderson has shown, modern collective identities are facilitated through rituals of mass media consumption. Anderson argues that because the citizens of nations are dispersed over vast spaces, the mass-mediated discourses in which they participate as recipients provides them with a sense of commonality and continuity. These citizens

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[22] Several interesting recent analyses of these spaces in addition to those already discussed include: Dianne Chisolm, "Love at First Sight, or Walter Benjamin's Dialectics of Seeing in the Wake of the Gay Bathhouse," *Textual Practice* 13.2 (1999): 243-272; Richard C. Cante, "Pouring on the Past: Video Bars and the Emplacement of Gay Male Desire," in *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, Joseph A. Boone, et al., eds. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P: 2000), 135-165; Ira Tattelman, "Presenting a Queer (Bath) House," in *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, Joseph A. Boone, et al., eds. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P: 2000), 222-258.

[23] Gill Valentine and Tracey Skelton, "Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself: The Lesbian and Gay 'Scene' as Paradoxical Space," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27.4 (Dec. 2003): 849. See, also: Benjamin Forest, "West Hollywood as Symbol: The Significance of Place in the Construction of a Gay Identity," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 13* (1995): 133-157.

"never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of communion."[24] For Anderson, the rise of print capitalism and the circulation of newspapers fostered this sense of communion. New printing technologies created the possibility for new forms of collectivity and consciousness, for imagining large groups of individuals as constituting nations. Newspaper reading, however, remains a type of paradoxical "mass ceremony," "performed in silent privacy." "Yet," he writes, "each communicant is well aware that the ceremony [she or he] performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands or millions of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion."[25] John Thompson refers to this as "mediated quasi-interaction" and extends his own discussion of collectivity identity formation to include radio, television, and other forms of mass media, all of which create "a kind of social situation in which individuals are linked together in a process of communication and symbolic exchange."[26] Within the context of mediated quasi-interaction, recipients of media are separated from both media producers and other recipients yet can still form social bonds with these other participants.

Much reader-response criticism has shown that all engagements with texts are socially shaped and experienced. The notion of a "solitary reader" for Elizabeth Long is less paradoxical than ideological, and it "obscures collective reading practices" as reading

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[24] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.
[25] Anderson, 35.
[26] John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), 84.

"is a profoundly social behavior."[27] What she refers to as "textual communities," those groups in which reading is collective and interactive, can empower readers, create social community, "sustain collective memory," and "challenge tradition."[28] To the extent that we can make an analogy between reading novels and watching television or going to the movies, we can also make the claim: "Viewing is profoundly social." Media reception involves a set of practices that are socially, historically, and culturally embedded and directly linked to the issues of the assumption, negotiation, and formation of collective identities. Those "communities," whether actual or imagined, in turn, enable particular viewing practices that can help create and sustain a sense of solidarity, allow for the redefinition of individual and collective subjectivity, sustain collective memory, challenge tradition, and activate fantasy.

While Anderson discusses members of the "imagined community" engaged in a silent and private ritual of reading mass media texts, we can also focus on the ways in which reception practices are collective, collaborative, and public. Thompson again discusses how individual and otherwise private meanings find a larger audience. When recipients of mass media talk about mass media in their everyday lives in a variety of public contexts they participate in the "discursive elaboration" of symbolic forms in which the forms under discussion are "adapted and dispersed to an ever-widening circle."[29] This type of discursive elaboration, moreover, may also provide the

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[27] Elizabeth Long, "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action," in *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audiences and Cultural Studies*, eds. John Cruz and Justin Lewis, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 182, 193.
[28] Long, 195.
[29] John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford, Stanford UP, 1990), 244.

"framework within which individuals recount aspects of their own lives, interweaving personal experiences with the re-telling of mediated messages."[30] Mass media not only enable forms of mediated quasi-interaction, they also shape face-to-face interaction—as in the case of television viewing parties, for example—and mediated interactions—as in the case of telephone conversations or online chat about television. This is what Thompson refers to as the "interactional impact of mass media" which is a central concern throughout this dissertation.[31]

How gay men have used film and television in challenging and redefining their social positioning, forging a sense of collective identity, and creating counterpublic spheres are my main concerns. Just as the "public" is comprised of numerous overlapping, competing publics, the "public sphere" is comprised of multiple, intersecting, and contradictory spaces and discourses. I do not use public sphere in the same way that it has been conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.[32] That is, the public sphere is not an ideal, singular arena in which individuals gather as equals to debate matters of general concern according to the dictates of "rational critical discourse" in order to influence the workings of the state apparatus. Rather, by public sphere I am referring a multitude of physical spaces and discursive sites where groups of individuals define and reproduce their social lives and the social lives of others.

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[30] Thompson, *Ideology*, 317.
[31] Thompson, *Ideology*, 226.
[32] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

Against the ideal and normative bourgeois public sphere discussed by Habermas, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge postulate a "proletarian public sphere" that the former integrates, excludes, and/or negates, and which persists as a "social horizon of experience."[33] For Negt and Kluge, the singular bourgeois public sphere is "illusory" in the sense that it alleges to represent "society as a totality" that cannot, in actuality "exist in a class society."[34] John Keane discusses the erosion of the model of public life based on the ideal of a unified public sphere. For Keane, the public sphere is comprised of a "complex mosaic of differently-sized, overlapping, and interconnected public spheres."[35] Keane describes various public spheres of scale ranging from "micro-public spheres" comprised of "dozens, hundreds, or thousands of disputants interacting at the sub-nation-state level" to "macro-public spheres" which bring together millions or billions of people within a global context."[36] For Fraser, this type of proliferation of public spheres "help[s] expand discursive space," which means a "widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies."[37]

Thompson, Keane, and others recognize that media enable the formation of public spheres. Habermas discusses the rise of modern media in terms of the "refeudalization" of the public sphere in which debate and the democratic process have given way to consumption and the spectacle of public relations. A particular line of critical theory developed in this regard:

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[33] Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience: Toward and Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 2.
[34] Negt and Kluge, 74.
[35] John Keane, "Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere," *The Communication Review* 1.1 (1995): 8.
[36] Keane, 8-9.
[37] Fraser, 124.

> Its unquestionable truism is that the mass media today *are* the public sphere and that this is reason for the degradation of public life if not its disappearance. Public life, the argument goes, has been transformed by a massive process of commodification of culture and of political culture in particular by a form of communication increasingly based on emotionally charged images rather than rational discourse, such that political discourse has been degraded to the level of entertainment, and cultural consumerism has been substituted for democratic participation.[38]

Against this, others, such as Michael Warner, have suggested that "the public sphere is . . . not simply corrupted by its articulation with consumption. If anything, consumption sustains a counterpublicity that cuts against the self-contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere."[39]

Others have discussed how various media shape public life and social subjects differently. Miriam Hansen, for example, points to the public dimensions of cinema, paying particular attention to the processes of reception, discussing how the film text, "the audience as collective [and] the theater as public space" intersect to form a social horizon of experience."[40] "On one level the cinema constitutes a public sphere of its own . . . . At the same time the cinema intersects and interacts with other formations of public life."[41] Elayne Rapping has argued that television is a kind of public sphere and audiences are types of publics "involved in this public sphere not only as decoders of texts, but also as politically identifiable subaltern communities who have . . . participated in the production of texts in their roles as consumers and, in some cases, as actual

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[38] Paolo Carpignano, Robin Anderson, Stanley Arnowitz, and William DiFazio, "Chatter in the Age of Electronic Reproduction: Talk Television and the 'Public Mind,'" in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed., Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 93.
[39] Michael Warner, The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 397.
[40] Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship and American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 14.
[41] Hansen, *Babel*, 7.

oppositional political groupings."[42] The concept of television as a public sphere allows her to "posit a set of representations and textual practices existing in a common site within which a complex, shifting set of dominant and subaltern meanings are struggled over."[43] Linda Harasim has described the Internet as a collection of different types of "networlds," or "*places* where we network."[44] Others have extended this discussion of the Internet as a collection of places in order to consider the means by which they function as public spheres. Lincoln Dahlberg, for example, has argued for an understanding of the Internet that would situate computer-mediated communication within "publicly-oriented online deliberative" forums that function similarly to how Habermas conceives of the public sphere.[45] Similarly, Nathaniel Poor has discussed how online spaces, to the degree that they are spaces of discourse in which users come together and discuss issues of relevance and where ideas are judged by merit, are public spheres.[46] Each of these authors point to the ways in which media enable publics to form and collectively they suggest the ways in which the public sphere is dispersed across many different sites. Thompson suggests that terming these "new forms of interaction, new kinds of visibility and new networks of information" a "refeudalization"

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[42] Elayne Rapping, *The Movie of the Week: Public Stories/Private Events* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992), xxix.
[43] Rapping, xxx.
[44] Linda M. Harasim, "Networlds: Networks as Social Space," in *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication*, Linda M. Harasim, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 15; emphasis in original.
[45] Lincoln Dahlberg, "Computer-Mediated Communication and the Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7.1 (2001). Available online, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/dahlberg.html>.
[46] Nathaniel Poor, Mechanisms of an Online Public Sphere: The Website Slashdot," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10.2 (2005). Available online, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/poor.html>.

of the public sphere requires that we ignore how profoundly electronic media have "altered the symbolic character of social life": "any comparison between mediated politics today and the theatrical practices of feudal courts is superficial at best."[47]

Again, the question this study attempts to answer is, in what ways have gay men historically utilized film and television texts in the process of forming counterpublic spheres? Gay men undoubtedly form a "group" though it is certainly not homogenous, static, uncontested, or necessarily egalitarian. How to characterize that group status has been a matter of much debate. For example, there are numerous reasons for approaching the notion of a "gay and lesbian community" with caution. Cindy Patton suggests that due to the "failure" of AIDS organizations to reach beyond their "white, middle-class, gay male core group" and as a result of its "co-optation," the conceptual importance and political viability of the term "gay community" is doubtful.[48] In "AIDS: Keywords," Jan Zita Grover echoes Patton's reservations when she claims that the concept of a "gay community" has little if any relevance to thinking about gay identity and experience. "Whether used by spokesperson for said community or by its enemies, the people characterized as the gay/homosexual community are too diverse politically, economically, demographically to be described meaningfully by such a term."[49] Grover's skepticism about the effectivity of the phrase "gay community" is both linked to its assumed lack of empirical grounding and to the fact that it is so often deployed in the

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[47] Thompson, *Media*, 75.
[48] Cindy Patton, "Safe Sex and the Pornographic Vernacular," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed., Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 32.
[49] Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS: Keywords," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 24.

service of the homophobic rhetoric of the "far right" for whom "gay community" signifies deviance, depravity, and disease. For some gay and lesbian activists and scholars, then, "gay and lesbian community" is a suspect term.

Hansen suggests that the term community "refers to a model of association patterned on family and kinship relations, on an affective language of love and loyalty, on assumptions of authenticity, homogeneity and continuity."[50] John D'Emilio has made the point that the emergence of gay and lesbian identities, publics, and politics were the direct result of the reconfiguration of familial relations under capitalism.[51] Given that, the characterization of gay collectivity as "community" is somewhat mistaken. In contrast to the model of collectivity implied by the term community, counterpublic "offers forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation, but these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated, no longer rooted in face-to-face relations, and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation."[52] Given that the focus of the dissertation is on mediated quasi-interaction, mediated interaction, and audience formations that often transcend local geographies and not so much on face-to-face communication among subjects that occurs in a shared physical space, the concern here is not so much the gay community as it is different manifestations of gay counterpublics as they intersect with other social and political counterpublics.

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[50] Hansen, *Babel*, xxxvi.
[51] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Henry Abelove, et al., eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 470.
[52] Hansen, *Babel*, xxxvi.

THE "PROBLEM" OF PLACELESSNESS

It would seem only logical to take up Clarke's *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* here, while discussing gays, media reception, and the public sphere, especially since Clarke addresses the challenge of commercial publicity to queer public sphere inclusion. His argument in this regard is that the contemporary public sphere, which is fictive yet nonetheless continues to structure public life, politics, and cultural production, creates a false equivalence between representational inclusion and political enfranchisement. By this, he suggests that visibility in the commercial media is offered up as and mistaken for evidence of the democratic capacity of the public sphere to "self-correct" and include all persons and interests in spite of its tendency historically to exclude many subjects such as queers, women, people of color, and laborers. For Clarke, representational inclusion is not necessarily empowering in any politically meaningful sense, and the commercial extraction of value from gay and lesbian representation can actually mask a more pervasive and abiding antagonism toward political inclusion. Moreover, queer public sphere inclusion entails a fundamental transformation of queer self-interests and does not simply represent "authentic" lesbians and gays as it makes demands on incorporated groups to conform to the moral standards used to define "normal citizens."[53] In order to appear "normal" and worthy of public sphere inclusion, queers must often censor themselves and abandon their actual interests. In this way, queer public sphere inclusion erases differences and also risks making "deferred and

[53] Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 10.

demonized remainders" of those queers who cannot or who refuse to conform to the standards that the public sphere imposes.[54]

Clarke's book is an insightful critique of the "politics of visibility" and the role the mainstream media have played in not only representing, but fundamentally transforming queer life by imposing a "phantom normalcy" upon those who would likely claim they have simply represented "positively." It serves as a reminder that "achieving equitable publicity is not simply a matter of reversing exclusion, erasing stereotypes and thus achieving 'realistic' representation."[55] Clarke does not simply reject queer representation altogether, as if one could, as evidenced in his discussion of the circulation of lesbian and gay images as examples of "commodified affect." Clarke builds on Ronald Judy's claim that commodified affect "can belong with millions of others in an asynchronic moment of consumption of the same affect, the same passion" in order to make the case that acts of media reception can offer the basis for social identification and belonging that breaks from traditional notions of community.[56] For Clarke, this is the historical importance of media representation: "at the same time that it determines value only according to commercial worth, it can also radically dissolve constipating moral perspectives and enable . . . the associational freedoms and representational equivalence largely abnegated by social and political institutions."[57] While examining the consumption of commodified affect at length is beyond the scope of Clarke's book, the

[54] Clarke, 7.
[55] Clarke, 20.
[56] Ronald Judy, "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity," *boundary* 2 21.3 (1994): 227.
[57] Clarke, 59.

idea provides a useful way of conceptualizing the moments of historical media reception examined here.

While Clarke's cautioning against mistaking commercial visibility for democratic inclusion is useful, his conception of the public sphere reduces it to a number of discursive relations that exist independent of the spaces in which they are created and circulated. He writes that the public sphere "designates not so much a particular set of places or institutions, as the tense relation between Enlightenment ideals of democratic publicness and their material realizations."[58] Contrary to Clarke, I want to suggest that the public sphere must designate both discursive interaction and the spaces that enable and constrain it. Henri Lefebvre writes "Every discourse says something about a space (places or sets of places); and every discourse is emitted from a space."[59] Each of the following media reception case studies begins with this observation in mind.

For Lefebvre, every society produces a type of space that enables the reproduction of economic, political, and social life. Lefebvre explains the production of space in relation to three concepts: spatial practices, representations of space, and spatial representations. Spatial practice is what materializes or "secretes" a society's space; it "propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical fashion," slowly and surely appropriating and mastering what it produces.[60] Spatial practices produce a perceived space that provides a certain continuity and cohesion, if not complete coherence, to a society and its spatial system, modes of production, reproduction, and governance. Closely linked to

[58] Clarke, 3.
[59] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 132.
[60] Lefebvre, 38.

spatial practices are representations of space, space as it is conceived by scientists, engineers, planners, and other producers of spatial discourses and ideology. Finally there are representational spaces, or the dominated spaces in which "inhabitants and users" live.[61] Representational space is associated with the "clandestine and underground" spaces of everyday life as well as with inhabitants' "works, images, and memories."[62] While the three are intricately connected, there is no direct correspondence between them. While representations of space, therefore, may attempt to subordinate lived space to its "plan," the inhabitants of lived spaces may find ways, although with great difficulty, to inhabit "deviant and diverted" spaces in a way that subjects the space of late capitalism to their own contrary purposes. Lived space "is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or center: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or, square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action, and of lived situations."[63] Spatial practices produce both sanctified sites, such as monuments, and spaces of abjection or "obscene" sites: the "hidden spaces on the near or far side of the frontier" where what is prohibited or profane is relegated. Lefebvre reserves for urban sites, the underground, the obscene (as opposed to the scene), deviant and diverted spaces, and other "spaces of enjoyment and joy" a transformative capacity which he calls the production of "contradictory space."[64]

The goal of space under late capitalism is fragmentation, homogenization, and consensus. Late capitalism produces "abstract space," or a space that seeks to eradicate

[61] Lefebvre, 39.
[62] Lefebvre, 50.
[63] Lefebvre, 42.
[64] Lefebvre, 385.

difference through various prohibitions and divide space in a way that reduces resistance to the accumulation of wealth and the production and exchange of commodities. "The whole of space is increasingly modeled after private enterprise, private property, and the family."[65] If late capitalism produces abstract space, it also produces abstract inhabitants: "In the face of fetishized abstraction, 'users' spontaneously turn themselves, their presence, their 'lived experience' and their bodies into abstractions, too. Fetishized abstract space thus gives rise to . . . 'users' who cannot recognize themselves within it."[66]

Michael Keith writes, "places are both conditions of possibility and the expressive modality of identities."[67] One troubling theme of much recent work in social and cultural geography, cultural theory, and media studies is that of "placelessness," the sense that once clearly defined and delimited public and private spaces and the identities that they enabled have been undermined and people are left disconnected from social space and other social subjects. Edward Relph, for example, claims placelessness results from an environment "without significant places and the underlying attitude that does not acknowledge significance in places and is becoming increasingly common."[68] For Relph, placelessness severs roots, empties symbols of meaning, imposes uniformity, and impoverishes experience. James Howard Kunstler describes how the "culture of place-making" in America has created a "geography of nowhere," lacking memorable and enduring places worth caring for and the sense of identity that they foster.[69] Oldenburg

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[65] Lefebvre, 376.
[66] Lefebvre, 93.
[67] Micheal Keith, "Shouts of the Street: Identity and the Spaces of Authenticity," *Social Identities* 1.2 (1995): 306.
[68] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London, Pion Limited, 1974), 143.
[69] James Howard Kuntsler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 275.

describes how the "problem of place," the absence of informal public life in America, has been exacerbated by urban development, suburbanization, the growing popularity of electronic media, and a retreat to the domestic sphere, all of which have steadily undermined people's sense of individual freedom and contentment, creating widespread "segregation, isolation, compartmentalization, and sterilization."[70] Meyrowitz describes how electronic media have reorganized social space and behavior by weakening the "once strong relationship between physical place and social 'place.'"[71] Meyrowitz seems to find the loss of a sense of place brought about by electronic media less lamentable than the other authors discussed here. He insists that older forms of collectivity and socialization have given way to new forms of social organization in which formerly segregated groups and behaviors are brought together in a new "shared arena" offered by television. "Through television, Americans may gain a strange sort of communion with each other."[72] These writings will be taken up at greater length in the following chapters. I bring them up here to introduce the issue of "placelessness" which, for queers, may be especially salient. Gordon Brent Ingram, for example, writes of queer relations to space: "Too many of the streets have no names, and there are not many friendly places to go. When you are living on the edges of things, the margins, 'home' can be hard to find."[73] Each of the case studies I am about to describe in some way attest to the centrality of placelessness within gay male counterpublics during this period.

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[70] Oldenburg, 285.
[71] Meyrowitz, ix.
[72] Meyrowitz, 90.
[73] Gordon Brent Ingram, "Marginality and the Landscapes of Erotic Alien(n)ations," in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance,* eds. Gordon Brent Ingram, et al. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 32.

GAY AUDIENCES AND MEDIA THEORY

Most lesbian and gay film and television audience studies have taken one of four approaches. First is the literature informed by mainstream mass communications research. Such studies usually attempt to identify and interrogate media stereotypes and suggest the social effects stereotyping has on the lives of lesbians and gay men. Second is the literature rooted in the Birmingham School of cultural studies, particularly the work of Stuart Hall on textual encoding and decoding. This work has tended to impose a rigid classificatory scheme upon interpretive strategies not so easily categorized and begins with an essentialist view of lesbian and gay identity. Third is the criticism informed by spectatorship theory rooted in psychoanalytic configurations of identity and desire. Such work typically begins by revealing how each text constructs a position from which the text demands to be viewed or argues that the social position from which one approaches the text creates either the impossibility or possibility for resistance to the text's production of dominant ideology. Finally, recent studies of film and television by lesbian and gay scholars have looked to poststructuralism and queer theory to open up media texts to the possibility of "polysemy," arguing for and demonstrating the possibility of an infinite number of subversive readings. While these approaches are vastly different, what each has in common with the others is the primacy given to the text over the context of its reception. This has serious ramifications for the ways in which media criticism has been conceptualized. Challenging this textually centered mode of media criticism with the adoption of a historical material approach to media reception not only shifts the focus away from the text to the viewing subject in historical context in order to understand

better gay male audiences, it allows for the possibility of overcoming the troubles associated with each of the approaches discussed in more detail below.

While Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* is more an informal, popular history of "homosexuality" and the cinema than an academic study, it has in common with mainstream approaches to media studies in the U.S. a number of presumptions and concerns: an emphasis on stereotypes, the presumption that television texts contain an inherent "message" which a naïve viewer cannot fail in internalizing, a concern with media effects, and an uncritical acceptance of what constitutes a "positive image." A sentiment that is reiterated throughout *The Celluloid Closet* is: "Mainstream films about homosexuality are not for gays."[74] Rather, the image of the gay man or lesbian in cinema almost always works toward heteronormative ends: comic relief, fostering laughter at the expense of "real" lesbians and gays that served homophobic hatred and violence; a confirmation of the superiority of heterosexuality when compared against its degenerate others (the pervert; the sissy; the manly woman; the fatal woman; the psychopath; the sad, lonely, and suicidal outcast); a figure for displaced heterosexual male misogyny; a confirmation of heteropatriarchal constructs of masculinity and femininity; an object lesson for those who dare to transgress the boundaries that separate proper masculinity and proper femininity. These are the various functions Russo assigns to the lesbian and gay images in cinema, and these images are typically met with, according to the author, a homogeneous response from heterosexuals. When Russo examines the reception literature for the large body of films he discusses, he almost without fail points to the

[74] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Rev. ed., (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 325.

ways in which those "interpretations arise invariably from the fear of homosexuality" and reinforce homophobic beliefs about actual gays and lesbians.[75] Most often, the film reviewers, who are for Russo representative of the general audience, respond to the images with the appropriate sense of disgust and anger and use such images to consolidate both their own sense of superiority and justify the "need" for the repression of this type of "perversion."[76]

Mainstream American media scholars often draw similar conclusions. Take, for example, two essays published in *Queer Words, Queer Images*: Emile C. Netzhammer and Scott A. Shamp's "Guilt by Association: Homosexuality and AIDS in Prime-Time Television" and Darlene M. Hantzis and Valerie Lehr's "Whose Desire? Lesbian (Non) Sexuality and Television's Perpetuation of Hetero/Sexism." Netzhammer and Shamp discuss how AIDS and gay male sexuality are inextricably bound in a way that reproduces AIDS as a "heterosexual problem" resulting from "homosexual culpability." For the authors, television presents a "unified ideology of AIDS" which "influences people's perceptions of AIDS and those who have it."[77] The article is essentially an ideological critique of the televisual discourse on AIDS and their primary concern is how this dominant discourse works against the interests of gay men. While highly critical of television's representation of AIDS, the authors do find moments when certain programs

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[75] Russo, 75.

[76] Chon Noriega has taken Russo to task for selectively reading the reception literature in a way that stressed the homophobic dimensions of spectatorship even when those responses directly contradicted such a conclusion. "Something's Missing Here!: Homosexuality, and Film Reviews During the Production Code Era, 1934-1962," *Cinema Journal* 30.1 (Fall 1991): 20-41.

[77] Emile C. Netzhammer and Scott A. Shamp. "Guilt By Association: Homosexuality and AIDS on Prime-Time," in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, ed. Jeffrey Ringer (New York: New York UP, 1994), 91.

present gay male characters in a "positive light."[78] Hantzis and Lehr, however, find the notion of a "positive" representation of lesbians on television problematic because, more often than not, these images perpetuate "hetero/sexism." Each article is concerned with how a heterosexual population might view the text, the meanings they will take from it. These messages and the viewer's needs can be gleaned from the text using the same interpretive strategies employed by the authors. For the authors of each article, television exists to gratify certain needs. For Netzhammer and Shamp, television's main purpose is educational: "The public needs guidance in how to deal with [the AIDS crisis]."[79] For Hantzis and Lehr, television is a way to reproduce and enforce "compulsory heterosexuality."[80] Their analyses rest on the assumption of the type of "ideal reader" which Janet Staiger demonstrates is problematic when thinking about media reception as it tends to signal not the practices of the viewer but the "epistemological and ethical assumptions" of the author.[81]

From this perspective, mainstream media texts, then, only work to secure the interests of the dominant heterosexual population. Film inevitably serves to gratify the psychological needs of the heterosexual audience and the hegemony of heteronormative culture. Russo homogenizes both the heterosexual and "homosexual" audience. The responses of gays and lesbians to film is no more diverse. So, for example, classical Hollywood cinema "introduced the possibility of homosexual activity into . . . film for a

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[78] Netzhammer and Shamp, 95.
[79] Netzhammer and Shamp, 104.
[80] Darlene M. Hantzis and Valerie Lehr, "Whose Desire? Lesbian (Non)Sexuality and Television's Perpetuation of Heterosexism," in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*. Ringer, Jeffrey. ed. (New York. New York UP, 1994), 107.
[81] Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Film: Studies in the Historical Reception of America Cinema.* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1992), 25.

covert gay audience while providing laughs for the majority."[82] When "the subtextual lesbian" makes an appearance it produces two responses. Russo writes that it "created in gay people a nostalgia for something that had never been seen onscreen. For the dread[ed] general public, however, the illusion [of heterosexual identity] remained in tact."[83] When ambiguously-coded male characters appeared on the screen, "the covert gay audience" may have been able to read the signs, "homosexuality is unmistakably there," but the heterosexual audience denied such a possibility through a disavowal of homosexuality: "it remains only for people to say that *in this case* such behavior would be natural to fend off the charges of unnaturalness in beloved film figures."[84]

Significantly, Russo repeatedly denies the possibility or desirability of "alternative pleasures" in mainstream film. There are two possible responses to Hollywood film: a (mis)recognition on the part of heterosexuals and an unfortunate identification on the part of the "covert gay audience." Similarly, Hantzis and Lehr do not take into consideration the pleasures lesbian and gay male viewers may find in shows such as *Designing Women* and *HeartBeat*. While Netzhammer and Shamp suggest the progressive potential a show such as *Designing Women* may have in relation to the representation of gay men by undercutting stereotypes about gay men and AIDS, making the connection is enough, in their view, to render the attempt at social commentary ineffective. Without examining audience responses, this conclusion remains suspect. Hantiz and Lehr write that "questions about audience response to lesbian and gay

[82] Russo, 14.
[83] Russo, 65.
[84] Russo, 74.

characters on television need to be asked."[85] They themselves, however, do not ask these questions although the conclusions they draw about the (non)representation of lesbian desire would seem to necessitate that they do. The television audience is complicit with the dominant discourse of television, and academic research "may lead to a more critical-consuming audience."[86]

Though there are obvious overlappings, Russo's analysis of film is less dependent on mainstream communications research than on the discourses of lesbian and gay liberation circulating at the time of his writing, the late 1970s and early 1980s. His work is clearly within the "modern" paradigm of lesbian and gay liberation which sought freedom from an oppression imposed by enforced invisibility through coming out and becoming visible. While Russo seems to point in the direction of a queer viewing pleasure in the mainstream media (the illicit pleasures of the covert lesbian and gay audience) that possibility is repeatedly shut down because of his commitment to the politics of lesbian and gay liberation as configured at that historical juncture. His negative reaction to *The Boys in the Band* is quite vehement: "The film is a good example of the ways in which a gay audience is lured into supporting a negative image of itself in response to an attractively homoerotic but ultimately destructive sensibility" and such films such as this asked lesbians and gays to "accept their own oppression and become contributors to it."[87] The viewer who takes pleasure in mainstream texts is, in the end, one that has internalized that culture's homophobia. The motivation for this containment

[85] Hantiz and Lehr, 119.
[86] Hantiz and Lehr, 120.
[87] Russo, 190-191.

of queer pleasure, then, is intricately bound up with Russo's concerns over the state of lesbian and gay liberation.

At the heart of *The Celluloid Closet* lies Russo's commitment to goals associated with affirmational politics as described by Richard Dyer, specifically a belief in the effectivity of consciousness raising and coming out as political strategies and the need for the creation of positive images and community unity. Russo's praise of the documentary, *The Word Is Out* (1978), the quintessential affirmational documentary, clearly aligns him with the goals of an affirmational politics, yet it is also a source of his ambivalence towards the emerging shape of gay culture. As Dyer also points out, "some consciousnesses are more acceptable than others."[88] What Russo liked about the film was the "sense of instant recognition for gays" that is provided and since "[i]nvisibility is the great enemy," films such as *The Word is Out* provided lesbians and gays with the opportunity to correct the "big lie" propagated by Hollywood.[89] Yet as Dyer and others have pointed out, affirmational documentaries attempted to construct a "general lesbian/gay biography" that was as false as it was attractive.[90] Linda Dittmar writes that such films were "polemic, affirming, and pragmatic," but they also "tended to produce their own erasures."[91]

This narrative of lesbian and gay liberation also informs Russo's reconstruction of history in several ways. The received history is that gays have always existed, but have

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[88] Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 245.
[89] Russo, 244
[90] Dyer, 244.
[91] Linda Dittmar, "Of Hags and Crones: Reclaiming Lesbian Desire for the Trouble Zone of Aging," *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 73.

also been forced into the "closet" by a repressive and oppressive heterosexual social order. However, recent lesbian and gay revisionist histories allow us to rethink that narrative and its universalizing, homogenizing, and totalizing tendencies. As Andy Medhurst points out, the lesbian and gay subject of Russo's narrative is a rather homogeneous one because he subsumes difference based on "gender, age, race, class and economic power" under the all-encompassing category of sexual preference.[92] Reconsidering this history allows us to rethink both the history of lesbian and gay representation in film and the history of the reception of film. The existence of a relatively visible "fairy culture" in New York City in the 1920s, for example, not only complicates the notion of an abiding gay invisibility but it also complicates how the image of the "sissy man" in silent and early sound film might have been read by gay men.[93] Was it taken to be the degrading image of gay male otherness, or did it address "fairy" experience in more meaningful ways? Moreover, Medhurst has also pointed out the tendency within what he calls the "gay consciousness project" to homogenize the present and "incorporate the past."[94] That is, lesbian and gay emerge as static, unchanging, essential identities.

I should stress here that I am not trying to be dismissive of *The Celluloid Closet*. The book is a major accomplishment. Nor do I want to suggest that Russo is simply naive and his views anachronistic. In fact, the recent popularity of the film version of

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[92] Russo, 59.
[93] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
[94] Andy Medhurst, "Notes on Recent Gay Film Criticism," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (New York: Zoetrope, 1984), 59.

The Celluloid Closet (HBO, 1996), which reconstructs a very similar history from a similar point of view, points to the persistence of these beliefs amongst lesbians and gays. Rather, I am trying to suggest the ways in which the arguments Russo presents can be historicized. This is, I believe, an important project because the notion of the "celluloid closet" has become part of gay and lesbian historical consciousness. While a persistent pessimism permeates the book, there is an equally pervasive sense of optimism about the possibility for change. This is, to me, a much more promising picture of lesbian and gay agency than is offered in the psychoanalytic approaches to lesbians and gays in film throughout the 1990s.

The "Afterward" to the revised edition of *The Celluloid Closet* communicates Russo's irritation and exasperation with Hollywood. He writes: "It has become clear since the first edition of this book that what we need is no more films about homosexuality. Mainstream commercial films and made-for-television movies that have as their subject the allegedly controversial issue of my existence may be necessary evils but they're not for me."[95] It may be this same sense of exasperation that has urged lesbian, gay, and queer media critics to turn to other film practices such as documentary, and independent film and video and turn, at least part way, away from Hollywood. Chris Straayer may be right in insisting on the ability of independent production to generate a "counterdominant discourse that produces countermeanings" and the necessity of these alternatives.[96] Yet these lines are not clearly drawn at all times, and Doty's analysis of

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[95] Russo, 325.
[96] Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes/Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientation in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 160.

mainstream television, to be discussed below, shows that much can also be learned from looking at the ways in which the mainstream may, and then again may not, produce countermeanings.

The second approach to lesbian and gay film and television studies that takes up the issue of viewing practices is rooted in the Birmingham School of cultural studies. The early work of Larry Gross examined here falls more within this approach to media than the mainstream American mass-communication approach.[97] Gross attempts to understand the ways in which "sexual minorities" engage with mainstream media texts. Gross writes, "most people gay or straight, have little choice other than to accept the negative and narrow stereotypes they encounter as being representative of gay people."[98] Gays, for Gross, "are all colonized by the dominant culture," and are especially vulnerable to internalizing homophobic notions of gay identity because they live in "isolation."[99] These are quite bleak pronouncements. They also rest on a number of assumptions that I believe need to be challenged. First, what so much of the media audience and reception literature has pointed to is that viewers do not simply accept media "messages" uncritically. Rather, viewers find ways of "poaching" texts. Gross's viewer is excessively passive and uncritical. Second, Gross assumes that sexual minorities exist and view in isolation. He also assumes that all media texts are simply

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[97] Gross has refined his approach to gays and lesbians in/and the media, though the fundamental assumptions of this early essay are still operative in his more recent work: Larry Gross, *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia UP, 2001).
[98] Larry Gross, "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media" in *Gay People, Sex, and the Media*, eds.. Michelle A. Wolf and Alfred P. Kielwasser (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991), 27.
[99] Gross, 33.

"negative and narrow." This precludes the possibility that a media text may represent sexual minorities in other, more "positive" or at least complex manners. In making such a claim, Gross uncritically reproduces one of the inherent problems with the encoding/decoding model. David Morley writes, "the messages which the model assumes it is dealing with are, in the end, designated as instances of [the central value system]."[100] He continues, "Richard Dyer first opened up this dimension of the decoding model in his review of *Victim*, where he points to texts whose preferred reading would not seem to fall so readily within the dominant code."[101]

In opposition to mainstream media, Gross suggests that lesbian and gay media will be, somehow, necessarily "positive," authentic examples of "gay people speaking for ourselves."[102] Gross also assumes that viewers assign to media images of sexual minorities a "referential" quality. In other words, gay people on TV are just like gay people "in real life." Related to this, Gross conceptualizes media reception in a way that does not address the issue of "fantasy," for either sexual minorities or majorities. Ien Ang critiques Radway's *Reading the Romance* for its failure to take into consideration that readers enjoy romances "precisely because they do *not* have 'reality value.'"[103] We might, then, following Ang, look at the ways in which gay male identifications with mass media texts are not simply about seeking out positive role models or internalizing the negative stereotypes those images represent, but engaging in complex fantasies that have their own "reality." In other words, an engagement with the mainstream media is not

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[100] David Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 126.
[101] Morley, 126.
[102] Gross, 43.
[103] Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 92-93.

simply an "irrational involvement in one's own oppression" as Gross would seem to have it.[104] Fantasizing may produce its own form of resistance and need not always fall into the category of "passive viewing." Even though Henry Jenkins illustrates that not all readings of mainstream media texts are anti-hegemonic, we still need not posit along with Gross that all readings of mainstream media texts are simply complicit in hegemonic constructions of sexual identity.

Fans are certainly "active" readers and fan readings are almost always "alternative," but are they necessarily counter-hegemonic? By addressing this issue, I do not mean to imply that "fans" are, for example, "overactive readers" or "cultural dupes." Rather than reinscribe the stereotypical notions of "fandom" which Jenkins discusses in *Textual Poachers*, I merely want to point to the ways in which different interpretive formations enable certain reading strategies and possibly contain others. Indeed, Jenkins claims, rightly I think, in "'Out of the Closet and into the Universe,'" that a "fan's resistant readings occur within rather than outside the ideological framework provided by the programme and is fought in the name of fidelity to the programme concepts."[105] While the fans Jenkins studied found acceptance and tolerance within the groups, the groups themselves, on certain occasions refused to engage in what could be considered "political acts." For example, many viewers would not involve themselves in a letter-writing campaign that sought to convince the producers to write gay characters into the show "for fear that it might tarnish their long-term relationship to fandom, a space they

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[104] Ang, 93.

[105] Henry Jenkins, "'Out of the Closet and Into the Universe': Queers and 'Star Trek'" in *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching 'Dr. Who' and 'Star Trek'*, eds. John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995), 263.

sought out specifically to escape the more doctrinaire corners of the gay and lesbian community."[106] Here a complex set of texts, motivations, desires, and interests structures collective identity around texts that seems to work against the possibility for producing counter-hegemonic meanings. In a passage that echoes my earlier insistence on the need to consider not only collective but public modes of media reception, Jenkins, sums up the relationship of fandom, gay and lesbian identity politics, and *Star Trek*.

> Precisely because it is a subcultural activity which is denied public visibility, resistant reading cannot change the political agenda, cannot challenge other constructions of gay identity, and cannot have an impact on the ways people outside of that group think about the issues that matter to Gaylaxians [gay fans of "Star Trek"].[107]

This does not, of course, mean that all fans are simply only ever complicit, but that fan culture introduces a complex number of determinates that make political transformation difficult. In fact, Jenkins seems to be suggesting that if fan culture could find a public forum in which to initiate and engage in such debates, that positive transformations could occur. Moreover, Jenkins allows us to begin to question under what conditions audience attempts to influence the processes of production and reception can be effective.

The third and fourth approaches to understanding gay and lesbian viewing practices focus on spectatorship. Film criticism, particularly the criticism that has drawn inspiration from structuralist linguistics and psychoanalysis, has tended to treat the viewer as a "spectator." That is, the viewer as subject is an effect of the text's discourse. Because feminist criticism has lead this concern for the spectator within film studies, the primary means by which the spectator has been understood is through the imposition and

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[106] Jenkins, "Out," 263.
[107] Jenkins, "Out," 263.

maintenance of sexual difference. For lesbian critics, this has posed serious theoretical dilemmas. In Patricia White's words, the "dominance of the heterosexual concept of 'sexual difference' as term and telos of feminist inquiry has impoverished not only the study of specific film texts, but also the very theorization of female subjectivity."[108] For White, feminist theories of spectatorship developed as a defense against lesbian desire. If the initial step in understanding the lesbian spectator, then, was displacing the centrality of heterosexuality, the next, obvious, step was understanding how lesbian spectators viewed films differently and which textual practices opened up the possibility of lesbian identifications, pleasures, and desires.

Judith Mayne has pointed out the distinction between the "subject" and the "viewer." The former is the "position supposedly assigned to the film viewer by the institutions of cinema" and the latter is "the real person who watches the movies."[109] To the degree that film spectatorship theory has privileged the "filmic apparatus," it has sought to uncover the "subject" of cinema, the "ideal spectator," and not the viewer, the historical subject. Shameem Kabir writes, "In emphasizing structuring devices and practices of codification to reveal ideological operations of a text, we are in danger of not accounting for the social subject who is receiving the text."[110] One solution to this problem would be, as Andrea Weiss demonstrates, to turn to the context of a film's reception in order to say something about the viewer. In "'A Queer Feeling When I Look

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[108] Patricia White, "Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: *The Haunting*," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories/Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 142.
[109] Mayne, 8.
[110] Shameem Kabir, *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film* (Washington: Cassell, 1999), 184.

at You,'" Weiss argues that Greta Garbo's star persona, rumors about her sexuality, the emerging lesbian and gay urban cultures, and moments of gender ambiguity in Garbo's films all worked to create the possibility that a lesbian audience could construct meanings possibly unavailable to other audiences in a way that allowed them to "define and empower themselves."[111]

Kabir offers the second possible solution to the problem of the absent viewer by arguing for "a textual analysis that does not preclude the receiving subject, but allows them to access their uniquely positioned subjectivities."[112] Authors such as Straayer sometimes assume a homogeneous lesbian subject when she makes claims about the "lesbian viewer" and "how her relationship to films with covert lesbian content resembles her positioning in society."[113] Kabir, in contrast, assumes a multiple, heterogeneous subject. Yet, her argument seems no less essentialist. The potential essentialism of spectatorship theory is most explicit in Earl Jackson's discussion of the "intersubjective narcissism" that characterizes the gay subject and gay male spectatorship. For Jackson, gay male subjectivity is formed in the "specular economy" of gay male desire in which "each man asserts his masculine privilege to act as subject of desire in order to elicit the desire of the other; each claims his gendered right to look in order to give the embodied self up to the 'annihilation' of the other's gaze."[114] For Jackson, this libidinal, psychic economy marked by a "heterodox reciprocity" and slippage between the subject and

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[111] Andrea Weiss, "'A Queer Feeling When I Look At You': Hollywood Stars and Lesbian Spectatorship in the 1930s," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 297.
[112] Kabir, 184.
[113] Straayer, 9.
[114] Earl Jackson, Jr., *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1995), 20.

object of desire is also evident in what Jackson refers of as the "pornographic apparatus" of gay film.

The readings he offers of several gay male hardcore films demonstrate the same sort of gay male subjectivity which he sees as defining gay male identity begins with the assertion that "the gay male spectator accesses a network of 'inappropriate' or transgressive identifications, structured by the anti-Oedipal mutuality of identification and desire. In his multiple or shifting identifications, the gay male spectator "transgresses the gendered dichotomies and disrupts the Cartesian unity of self."[115] Jackson's claims about the nature of gay male subjectivity and gay male spectatorship reveal the degree to which he has homogenized gay male identity. His theory relies on the notion of the mobility between the positions of subject and object of desire and reciprocity between the one who looks and the one who is looked at. Yet, it is impossible to separate this specular economy from relations of power. When the category of gay male subject is opened up to racial, among other, differences, Jackson's celebration of the subversive potential of gay male sexuality is less tenable. Richard Fung, for example, has shown how gay male sexual fantasies about Asian men cannot be separated from colonial fantasies. It would seem to follow that the pleasurable "intersubjective narcissism" of gay male porn is often reserved for *white* gay men. For Asian men, the "annihilation" of the self is as likely to be "an act of submission, not of pleasure" because the gay Asian male most often "exists for the pleasure of others."[116]

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[115] Jackson, 139.
[116] Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, eds., Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 152-153.

The point here is that in attempting to construct a totalizing theory of the gay male social subject and cinematic spectator, Jackson must first deny the very real differences and power relations that exist between gay men. For Jackson, as is the case with much spectatorship theory, the spectator as "subject" is conflated with the social subject in a way that cannot account for the social, cultural, political, and discursive factors that exist "outside" of the text. If Mayne is correct in asserting that, for gay and lesbian media studies, "the question is not what characterizes gay/lesbian spectatorship as common responses to film, but rather what place film spectatorship has had in the cultivation of gay/lesbian identity," then a contextual approach to media reception would seem to get at the answer more readily than a theory of gay male spectatorship that centers on an "ideal" text/spectator relation.[117] Indeed, John Champagne has suggested that textual analyses of gay male porn, such as Jackson's, do not consider the possibility "that gay porno films signify culturally and socially *regardless* of whether they are 'actually' watched or not" because "the way they signify culturally and socially has less to do with their individual 'content' than with the wide weave of forces beyond the grasp of a discipline dedicated primarily to reading films."[118]

The spectator of television has been conceptualized quite differently from the spectator of cinema. Because of the medium's fragmented, multiple discourse and the site of its reception, the viewer is often assumed to be "mobile," taking up multiple positions in relation to television's multiple modes of address and in relation to the

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[117] Mayne, 166.
[118] John Champagne, "'Stop Reading Films!': Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography." *Cinema Journal* 36.4 (Summer 1997): 77.

"distracted" state of television viewing. These notions of mobility and distraction are what enable Alexander Doty to "queer" the television viewer. What concerns him are the ways in which nonqueer viewers are encouraged to experience television in ways that complicate the notion of a fixed and stable sexual and gender identity. The notion of multiplicity makes *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* seem like the ideal television text because "frequently the most conventional codes of queerness as heterosexual cross-gender identification will be juxtaposed or will co-exist with more progressive reworkings of the masculine and the feminine."[119] In other words, the multiple registers across which Pee-Wee can be read is symptomatic of all television. (Pee-Wee is just a little more queer than most TV characters.) Those television shows which Doty labels "lesbian narratives" rely less on multiple registers than *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* and more on a narrativization of woman-woman bonding "that connect[s] an audience's pleasure to the activities and relationships of women."[120] Yet if the programs insist that the women on *Laverne & Shirley* or *Designing Women*, for example, are straight, the "lesbian charged spaces" encourage "readings of most of the women as 'really' lesbian."[121] The notion of television as fractured allows for it to also be contradictory. Doty is working within the assumptions of much television theory that stresses television's multiplicity while, obviously, queering it.

If Russo is situated historically within the discourses of lesbian and gay liberation, the more recent queer theory and its investments in rethinking desire and power as unruly

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[119] Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 83.
[120] Doty, 41.
[121] Doty, 43.

and dispersed informs Doty's analysis of mass culture. For Doty, desire is too unruly for the hetero/homo binary to hold. Doty's task becomes foregrounding the ways in which hetero identity is always already queer, and the ways in which that desire can disrupt heteronormativity.

The emphasis in Doty's work is not the role of negative stereotypes in relation to the maintenance of homophobia, although he has not abandoned the concern entirely, but rather the way in which signification opens up the possibility for rethinking the subject. In other words, Doty attempts to answer the question of what signification processes are more amenable to multiplicity, disruption, and dispersion. From the perspective of queer theory, the very notions of gender and sexual identity are complicit with heterosexism. If processes of signification can be shown to disrupt that notion of a coherently gendered and sexual identity, they also open up new possibilities for subject positions. Doty reverses the queer/straight relationship by moving queerness to the center and flaunting that fact: "I've got news for straight culture: your readings of texts are usually alternative ones for me and they usually seem to be desperate attempts to deny the queerness of mass culture."[122]

What I want to suggest here, however, is that as a type of political criticism, the valorization of the unruliness of desire as evidenced by television programming without an exploration of how and when queer viewing practices are enabled is problematic. He writes, "enough lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and other queers taking and making enough of these moments can create a more consistent awareness within the general public of queer

[122] Doty, xii.

cultural and political spaces."[123] Doty's readings of popular culture are quite fascinating, yet he stops short of a materialist, historical approach to reception by neglecting to demonstrate how such readings have been engaged by viewers and under what circumstances they were able to emerge as an interpretive practice.

INTERPRETIVE COUNTERPUBLICS

Like counterpublic as it has been defined here, an "interpretive community" is constituted in and through discourse and the acts of media reception. Janice Radway argues that the "meaning" of any text is not located in the text, but in the process of reading, a "complicated semiotic and fundamentally social process."[124] She writes that "readers read differently because they belong to what are known as various interpretive communities, each of which acts upon print differently for different reasons."[125] Readers read differently because shared norms regarding interpretation come to bear on how texts are engaged. Moreover, Jenkins has argued that a fan group, one specific type of interpretive community, is "a social group struggling to define its own culture and to construct it own community."[126] This struggle occurs in and over acts of reading, interpretive norms, and cultural boundaries. Similarly, Staiger notes in "Finding Community in the Early 1960s" that the American underground cinema of the 1960s provided gay men the space and opportunity to explore the possibilities of gay identity

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[123] Doty, 4.
[124] Janice Radway, "Interpretive Communities And Variable Literacies: The Functions Of Romance Reading," in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives In Cultural Studies*, eds. C. Mukjerji and M. Schudson (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991), 468.
[125] Radway, 468.
[126] Jenkins, "Out of the Closet," 3.

and experience and to form aesthetic, social, and political communities.[127] Significantly, what each of these authors points to is how the collective and social nature of media reception enable and constrain certain types of cultural, social, and political practices. Acts of media reception are not solely private and subjective; they most typically occur within collective, collaborative, and public contexts making interpretations social and intersubjective. By situating gay male media reception in a public context, I want to suggest that acts of media reception have been crucial to the process of constructing gay male counterpublic spheres.

Staiger, Ellsworth, and Joshua Gamson have each developed strategies for understanding lesbian and gay historical spectators. After explaining each author's approach, I suggest what they are able to account for which the four major approaches to lesbian and gay audiences have not. After reviewing these dominant approaches, I outline a general conceptualization of the type of reception theory that informs the case studies that comprise the remainder of the dissertation, each of which is described briefly here.

The negotiation, even interrogation, of "identity" is fundamental to the process of forming counterpublic spheres. This interrogation often occurs within the context of public discourse about media texts and the possible ways in which they can be interpreted. Most recent theorizations of "identity" take it to be a process rather than a pre-given category, posit that identity categories are heterogeneous and contradictory,

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[127] Janet Staiger, "Finding Community in the Early 1960s: Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics," in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, eds. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1999).

argue that identity is relational, and assert that identity is something that can be assumed, although not in an unproblematic way, negotiated, or resisted within the particular historical circumstances that produce them. For example, in a provocative piece, "Gender in/and Media Consumption," Ien Ang and Joke Hermes, assert that "gender is not an obvious predictor of viewing behavior."[128] What they are pointing out here is that gender identity is not predictive because "identity" itself is in no way a given. Gender is a process embedded in "complex and contradictory" social, historical, economic, and discursive contexts which come to bear on identity and media reception. Given that gender involves the three overlapping components of definition, identification, and position, it can be, at each level, assumed, negotiated, and refused.[129]

Where the article seems less compelling, however, is in its relentless focus on the *individual refusal* of gender as resistance. Gender may be viewed, in the authors' words, as a "prison-house" in which one is trapped, yet the assumption of a collectively negotiated gender identity may itself simply be a step in the process of gaining the agency that enables resistance. It also needs to be noted, however, that the formation of collective identity is not, in itself, necessarily political or politically progressive. In fact, recent queer and poststructuralist theories have tended to focus on the ways in which identity and "visibility" politics, argued to be a kind of laying claim to a preconstituted identity category, are in fact complicit in some way with "dominant culture." From this

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[128] Ien Ang and Joke Hermes, "Gender and/in Media Studies," in *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 110.

[129] This article is problematic because, I believe, the authors have misread recent feminist poststructuralist arguments about the process of gender formation when they argue for the possibility of "non-gendered identifications" and "gender-neutral zones" in everyday life. While gender is unpredictable and gender norms can be subverted, if gender is constitutive, there can be no "outside" to it.

perspective, the interrogation of identity is what needs to be central to any kind of identity politics. By linking issues of sexual identity in media reception to the formation of counterpublic spheres, Ellsworth, Gamson, and Staiger illustrate how identity is in fact negotiated, interrogated, and *re*-constituted, as opposed simply to disarticulated, in complex, relational, and politicized ways.

What seems to unite each of these articles and what I find particularly valuable about them are the ways in which they understand identity to be a process informed by a subject's socio-historical context. Gamson's article, "The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity," is useful for several reasons. The author illustrates how both identity and collectivity are shaped by organizations and emerge in tandem as a direct result of organizational goals. These goals are linked to political philosophies (questions of the very nature of identity, disruption and assimilation, multiculturalism and inclusivity, for example), market forces, and community ties to other social formations (e.g., the "art world"). Organization, identity, and community are inextricably bound and inseparable from questions of politics. For Gamson, film festivals are "homes for collective identities" which involve a "conscious decision making about the nature of 'we.'"[130] Gamson rightly points out that identity is not "free floating," that it is assumed and negotiated within "community organizations." Those organizations, moreover, evidence complex and competing understandings of the politics of identity. The "lesbian and gay community" is in no way monolithic, and his comparative study of the New

[130] Joshua Gamson, "The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York," in *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 528.

Festival and Mix—two New York film festivals, which feature different films and filmmakers and have quite different goals and constituents—allows him to highlight that fact. What emerges from the comparison are two competing views of "identity" linked to two different political philosophies, each enabling a different form of political practice. For example, the decision on the part of the organizers of Mix to include video in the festival in addition to film was made in part because of that community's commitment to showcasing the work of gay men and lesbians of color who, due to production costs associated with filmmaking, often use video. The New Festival's emphasis on commercially viable film is both the result of the need for organizational survival but also notions about gay and lesbian politics. In other words, mainstream films make money, and profit is what allows the organization itself to survive. The choice to show commercially viable films, however, is also linked to a particular political philosophy. Mainstream films attract large audiences, and the size of the audience speaks to the festival's ability to achieve a certain inclusivity. At the same time, however, Gamson makes clear that the New Festival is more about meeting the consumerist desires of what is essentially a "niche market" than it is about enabling political practice. While Gamson's article does not directly address the issue of reception, or how texts are being interpreted, it illustrates how, for gay and lesbian communities, some notion of what is political informs the *context* in which those acts of reception take place. In examining the relationship between gay male collective identity and 1960s underground cinema, Staiger claims, "going to these films after midnight was a declaration of where one stood in these

debates [over gay sexual liberation]."[131] The same may be said about going to a gay and lesbian film festival in the 1990s. In choosing your festival, you are choosing a public sphere and entering into the debate over the nature of identity.

Ellsworth deals in a direct way with the question of textual interpretation and its importance to creating a sense of collectivity. Ellsworth examines the reception of *Personal Best* (1982) and illustrates how lesbians engaged in a process of "discursive self production" through the collective interpretation of the film.[132] Lesbian identity is not assumed to be preconstituted. Rather, it is shown to emerge both in the viewer/text interaction and in the process of engaging other "interpretive communities." Ellsworth points out that oppositional reading is both enabled and constrained by the film and by the context in which it is received, specifically, in the "antagonisms" between mainstream, feminist, and lesbian audiences. Perhaps the author's most important point, however, is that reception practices are not solitary acts, meaning is not simply private and idiosyncratic. She writes that "through material practices like consciousness raising groups, women's studies courses, and feminist film reviewing, feminist communities collectively develop interpretive strategies for making sense of those structures of feeling, moving them into the sphere of public discourse by giving social, semantic form to anxieties and desires."[133] Here, too, the process of identity formation is collective and co-extensive with the material practices of a community. Identity and community are mutually sustaining and emerge in wider struggles over meaning. Significantly, what

[131] Staiger, "Finding," 40.
[132] Ellsworth, 184
[133] Ellsworth, 184.

creates a sense of community for Ellsworth is "pleasure," both pleasure of viewing and pleasure taken in the act of asserting identity in interdiscursive exchanges with other interpretive communities. These are what the author refers to as "collectively constructed social pleasures."[134] Because the pleasures of "identification, recognition, and validation" require the "rejection and alteration of discourses at the very center of the hegemonic bloc," the author manages to underscore the degree to which certain viewing pleasures are politicized and can enter into public discourse in meaningful ways.[135]

If, for an oppositional reading to be political it needs to be public, the status of gay male film in the 1960s and gay male community as "underground," may prove, at first glance, to be troubling. However, as Staiger points out, "underground" in the 1960s did not necessarily signify being out of sight but, rather, connoted "alternative communities and political activism."[136] Staiger demonstrates how the production, exhibition, and reception of underground films helped create a "visible gay culture" and links this culture to the struggle for gay sexual liberation. Because Staiger, unlike Ellsworth, has chosen to examine not mainstream but marginal texts and their relationship to identity and community, the contexts of production and exhibition become equally important to understanding how this community took shape and asserted a sense of collective identity.

What Staiger also demonstrates, much like Gamson, is that identity is a process through which borders between individuals are established, negotiated, and/or

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[134] Ellsworth, 194.
[135] Ellsworth, 194.
[136] Staiger, "Finding," 50.

maintained. Particularly salient in this case are the debates over amoralism and sexual diversity. It is around these issues that film viewers split.[137] By subverting the norms of production and exhibition in New American Cinema, dominant codes of sexual morality, and gender and racial codes in its production and exhibition practices, the underground filmmakers were also staking a political claim that challenged prior conceptualizations of gay sexual identity, those held by both the mainstream and the Homophile movement. Staking this claim was, in a sense, marking off a certain territory within the wider film community and generating a sense of solidarity that fostered oppositionality. Staiger writes, "when rough reflexive popular culture is replaced by sex play and camp humor, some people drew the line. Of course, for others, that last taboo is liberating for its creation of community jokes and pleasure."[138] Significantly, however, these rifts not only fostered a sense of being "in or out." They also created a public debate over the role of film in the creation of the possibility for social change and the practices that would be most effective in producing change.

Ellsworth does not simply assume that the lesbian audience is somehow "free" to construct meaning from the texts. Rather, she emphasizes both textual and contextual constraints. In fact, she ends the article by asserting that not all interpretive strategies will meet in all cases a community's "political imperatives." The goal of reception studies then can be to "help protesting communities" meet those imperatives.[139] Staiger, for example, acknowledges that in terms of "content" and exhibition, underground

[137] Staiger, "Finding," 44-45.
[138] Staiger, "Finding," 45.
[139] Ellsworth, 195.

cinema did not simply emerge out of nowhere, but was enabled by the new modes of movie-going associated with horror and exploitation cinema. All situate issues of identity and subjectivity not only in collective community formations, but *public* ones as well. Gamson, moreover, highlights the ways in which "going public" opens up a new set of problems, such as the commodification and depoliticization of community "life styles."

Each of these three authors, to one degree or another, emphasizes the importance of material practices of production, exhibition, and reception in the formation of community. Ellsworth, for example, demonstrates how media producers attempted to establish an interpretive framework through pressbook releases. It is this "dominant" framework against which she can then argue that negotiated and oppositional readings make alternative sense. By addressing the issues of production and exhibition, Staiger, like Ellsworth, can then make a case for the viability of a "politics of pleasure." When, for example, the dominant culture emphasizes a "passive" mode of reception, a certain seriousness toward art, and the repression of sexual desire, an active mode of reception that introduces an element of "camp" and unpredictability, a production practice that valorizes the popular and the playful, and a permissive and experimental attitude toward sexuality can politicize and invert that hierarchy.

Any given text opens up the potential for multiple "meanings." Sonia Livingstone writes that the value of plural decodings of media texts, what audience research and reception studies takes as axiomatic, is questionable "without having shown

how such supposed resistant decodings actually do make a difference politically."[140] Because, as Livingstone points out, much media reception literature borrows the language of identity politics (e.g., "oppositional," "liberatory"), the most important task would seem to be to illustrate how media reception can be linked to a politics of transformation. What difference can it make, for whom, and in what circumstances? As I hope the above response demonstrates, Gamson, Ellsworth, and Staiger, by linking the issue of media reception to questions of collective gay and lesbian identity, open up the possibility that oppositional readings can, in fact, make a political difference. An important question to ask involves the degree to which "alternative" readings in other contexts can be linked to the issue of challenging or reproducing hegemonic meaning. In what way do other social formations allow for or encourage alternative readings that are also oppositional in a politically meaningful sense? The various interpretive strategies that have been brought to bear on mainstream media texts by gay male counterpublics and the political effectivity of these strategies will be traced in the case studies of this dissertation.

HISTORICAL MATERIALIST ANALYSIS

As I have attempted to point out throughout the above discussion of the four main approaches to gay and lesbian viewing practices, none of the authors, with the exception of Jenkins, find a need for examining historical material spectators. At some level, all maintain the notion of an often essentialized "ideal spectator" and see the text as the main

[140] Sonia Livingstone, *Making Sense of Television: The Psychology of Audience Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 249.

object of study. Some of the criticisms leveled against each study may be avoided if lesbian and gay media studies begins to utilize an approach that is both materialist and historical and shifts its attention at least partially away from the text and toward those who view and interpret it and the multiple contexts in which media texts are received. The focus of each of the case studies undertaken in this dissertation is the lesbian and/or gay audience, the interpretive strategies that gay and lesbian counterpublics bring to bear on a number of media texts, the political ramifications of these interpretive strategies, and how previous research in film and television studies cannot adequately account for the specificity of lesbian and gay reception.

As Staiger points out, reception studies is different from approaches to media which emphasize "media effects." The emphasis in reception studies is not what texts "do" to viewers, but what viewers situated within particular historical circumstances with specific interpretive protocols available to them "do" to the texts with which they are engaged.[141] Thus, the problems associated with mainstream communications media research and media effects are avoided. Reception studies does not give the text a determinate role in the act of interpretation. Rather, reception studies is concerned with the range of discourses that come into play in the acts of interpretation. Unlike mainstream mass communications research, then, reception studies seems more equipped to uncover a range of discourses that work against the hegemonic construction of "social reality" and social subjects than mainstream mass communications research which tends to emphasize only "dominant" discourses. Furthermore, reception studies need not

[141] Staiger, *Interpreting*, 210-212.

remain locked in the debate over what constitutes a "positive image." In taking a materialist historical approach to media reception, it becomes obvious that what constitutes "positive" is the result of the discourses available to viewers making such evaluations and the outcomes of the engagement with the text. Additionally, what constitutes "positive" is related to the viewer's position in both social and reading formations. Because there are multiple lesbian and gay subject positions and counterpublic spheres, a consensus over what constitutes a positive image is unlikely and even undesirable. Reception studies can assist in uncovering how these normative notions have changed over time in relation to the media and how and why "positive images" have been sites of struggle between lesbian and gay counterpublic spheres.

Moreover, historical material reception studies resists the tendency to categorize interpretations "into only three frameworks labeled hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional."[142] As my discussion of Gross's work illustrates, such a framework is untenable. Second, historical material reception studies does not treat texts "as unified, reproducing without contradiction hegemonic ideology."[143] Arguably, much mainstream mass communications research exhibits this tendency. Media texts are not simply a product of a dominant capitalist (and/or heterosexist) culture "which ought always and totally to be opposed."[144] Reception studies, however, can help in understanding how alternative pleasures can be extracted from ostensibly hegemonic texts.

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[142] Staiger, *Interpreting*, 73.
[143] Staiger, *Interpreting*, 71.
[144] Staiger, *Interpreting*, 71.

Historical materialist reception studies can help researchers avoid the essentializing tendencies of spectatorship theory. While I maintain that a gay subject can be traced through history, what that signifies across time and for different subjects within specific counterpublics is not static and cannot simply be assumed. Rather, the formation of gay subjects is a process which a historical material approach to media reception can help us better understand. Perhaps most importantly, a historical materialist reception studies approach to lesbians and gays and the media can help demonstrate how lesbians and gay men are agents in their own history and the world that surrounds them.

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

When choosing to write about the intersection of gay male audiences, media texts, and the public sphere, I had a potentially enormous body of material available to me for discussion. I started by limiting my analysis to those texts that explicitly represent gay characters or gay themes. I further limited the material by choosing media texts that have, to one degree or another, been dismissed as historically, politically, or aesthetically problematic or inconsequential. *Cruising*, while developing a cult following with gay men (and lesbians), is still considered by many to be a low point in the history of Hollywood representations of homosexuality. The AIDS films I discuss are often ignored in favor of praising different kinds of HIV/AIDS activist art and video. While TV movies have consistently portrayed gay men and lesbians—and done so, arguably, sympathetically—TV movies themselves have not been taken seriously by most critics and by many TV viewers. Focusing on the margins of already marginal culture was a way of drawing attention to how the meaning of media text cannot be separated from the

context of reception.[145] In each of these case studies, I illustrate how gay male audiences found ways to make these texts meaningful within their own lives, in spite of the claims by some critics that the texts under consideration were indifferent, irrelevant, if not hostile, to gays.

Within this more narrow framework, the specific case studies described below were chosen for several reasons. First, the availability of materials helped guide my choices. Having a general idea of the texts to research, I did an exhaustive search of the online and offline databases and indexes available at the University of Texas at Austin to see how much material was available. I also conducted research at the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, where I found a wealth of material on the impact of *Cruising* on the scene while browsing the microfilmed copies of the local gay and lesbian press around the time of the film's production and release and the "Stop the Movie *Cruising*" file that is part of the Society's ephemera collection. Some films and TV movies have been discussed more than others, and since I rely mostly on what audience members have written about their experiences, I chose the texts that have produced the most extensive—and in my opinion the most complex and interesting—discursive elaborations. Second, the case studies chosen help illustrate the public and social dimensions of audience activity. Third, taken together, they allow me to sketch out the ways in which the public sphere is dispersed across different localized geographical and delocalized electronic spaces. Fourth, the case studies help me explain how collective

[145] Thanks to Mary Kearney for helping me more clearly articulate this.

identity formation is a process that takes place within different social spaces and counterpublics but always in connection with other publics. While my focus is on gay men, other social subjects are present throughout this dissertation: lesbians played a key role in the protests against *Cruising* and in the counterdiscourses about HIV/AIDS discussed here and lesbians and the mothers of gay men are central to the discussions of *Any Mother's Son* on Lifetime Online. That Lifetime, "Television for Women," is the focus of a chapter also suggests the ways in which the concerns, interests, and fantasies of gay male audiences are both marginalized and shared by other audiences.[146] It also suggests how social identities are formed as much through social and affective commitments and connections and political alliances and coalitions that have little to do with erotic desires as they are through erotic attachments. Utilizing a chronological case study approach allowed me to emphasize the ways in which audiences in general and collective gay identities in particular are contextual and dynamic and not "essential" and static.

I view each of the following case studies through the lens of historical materialist reception studies and analyze the discourses produced by gay male—and, at times, other—audience members and the conditions under which they were produced. The following chapters will deal with three distinct audience formations in relation to film, TV, and the Internet within certain socio-spatial contexts while drawing attention to the experiences of "placelessness." One argument I make throughout this dissertation is that audience members are both users of media and inhabitants of social space. To better

[146] Thanks to Lisa Moore and Mary Kearney for both encouraging me to think more about the presence and role of women within my dissertation.

understand audiences and how they negotiate identities in relation to media texts, we must first understand the places they do and do not occupy. By placelessness I am suggesting the ways in which the relationship between social subjects and the places they inhabit are often marked by experiences of disjuncture, alienation, isolation, hostility, and feelings of being uprooted, lost, and "out of place." The case studies included span from 1980 through 1997, and each provides the opportunity to engage with other cultural, social, and political issues: masculinity and urban sexuality; HIV/AIDS, mourning and collective memory; and television, affect, and computer-mediated communication. What unites them, however, is the concern with socio-spatial activities of audience members and how they are enabled and constrained by film, television, and the Internet.

Cruising

Two chapters are dedicated to a discussion William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980), the "politicized audience," and the film's mainstream critical reception. The first of the two chapters focuses on the street protests against the making and the exhibiting of the film and is primarily historical. Relying on accounts of the protests in the national, mainstream and local, alternative presses, and the historical materials from the "Stop the Movie *Cruising*" group available at the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, I attempt to narrate the events in New York and San Francisco in relation to the politics and culture of the "gay ghetto," the marginalization of queers within the national political public sphere, and the social, cultural, and political tensions foregrounded by the

production and exhibition of *Cruising*. These protests have sometimes been dismissed as "hysterical."[147] I propose, rather, that they are expressions of certain clearly identifiable intra- and inter-group tensions related to urban space, "gay ghetto" politics, gender, and expressions of homoerotic desire.

Gay ghettos are urban spaces containing high concentrations of gay institutions, commercial outlets, and residential areas that are relatively isolated from the larger community. Martin Levine discusses how the gay ghetto provides residents with a feeling of "being at home."[148] At the same time, however, the gay ghetto is a kind of withdrawal into a semi-public sphere that offers security, on the one hand, but isolation on the other. If the gay ghetto provides respite and protection from homophobia, they can only ever be tenuous at best (attested to by the homophobic violence inflicted on The Castro in San Francisco and the police raids of gay bars in Greenwich Village in New York discussed later). A certain model of identity and association developed within the isolated spaces of gay ghettos that privileged wealthy, white males. However, that did not go unchallenged. That hundreds of men and women would join the riots staged to stop the filming of *Cruising* in Greenwich Village at the same time that hundreds more gay men would accept upwards of $50 a day to be extras in the film—the price depending on whether or not they were willing to appear nude or have sex in front of the camera[149]—points to some of the deep rifts that emerged in gay ghettos around gender, sexual pleasure, and politics. The influx of gays and lesbians to the urban gay

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[147] Paul Burston, "Confessions of a Gay Film Critic, or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love *Cruising*," *Anti-Gay*, ed. Mark Simpson (New York: Freedom Editions, 1996), 103.
[148] Martin Levine, "Gay Ghetto," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4.4 (Summer 1979): 372.
[149] Alexander Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*, Ghetto Politics, Gay Sexuality," *Social Text 4* (1981), 100.

ghettos in the 1970s and 1980s helped dissolve that already embattled "gay identity at its geographic locus."[150] The devastation wrought by HIV/AIDS—and explored in painful emotional detail in the writings of Andrew Holleran and David Wojnarowicz—only exacerbated the sense of placelessness emerging from the gay ghettos, which became for many a "limbo of conflicting emotions" which Kenneth Foote argues marks certain sites of loss and defines placelessness.[151]

Judith Mayne is right to point out that a conventional approach to understanding spectators cannot adequately account for the protests against *Cruising* and *Basic Instinct* (1992). She writes "I am not certain that spectatorship is the appropriate word to describe these political actions, which have far less to do with how films are seen and consumed and far more to do with how they are produced."[152] Historical materialist reception studies looks to uncover the circumstances that give rise to particular interpretations of media texts. The reception of a text does not begin at the time a TV program starts or a film rolls. Most of the time audience members approach a text with a number of expectations that are shaped by various intertextual and extratextual factors and which come to bear on the experience of viewing and interpreting the text. Like advertising, reviews, gossip, and other forms of publicity generated in relation to media texts, the public protests against *Cruising* helped establish a perhaps unsanctioned yet nonetheless significant horizon of meaning for the film, and in that sense, they have quite a bit to do

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[150] Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," *GLQ* 2.3 (1995), 274.
[151] Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, Revised and Updated (Austin: U of Texas P, 1997), 208.
[152] Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge. 1993), 164.

with how the film is seen and consumed. Mayne also argues that debates about ostensibly homophobic films among gays and lesbians are not usually about "gay and lesbian spectatorship" as they tend to focus on how "'middle America' would perceive the gay stereotypes, not on how gays and lesbians themselves responded to the film."[153] In the case of *Cruising* there are numerous articles and letters to the editors in the local gay and lesbian presses in New York and San Francisco that attempt to explain how gay men and lesbians themselves responded to the film. Debates about spectatorship, however, while quite significant, are mostly about the politics of representation. The protests against *Cruising* and the debates that they sparked were as much about the material politics of place as they were about representation. This chapter attempts to explore at greater length that politics of place.

While many gay men and lesbians in New York and San Francisco protested the film, no consensus emerged among them about the protests, their cause, and their effects. At the same time that the protests draw attention to the possibility of collective identity and collective action, they also point to its limitations. The second of the two chapters is the more theoretical chapter that seeks to explain the protests in relation to the socio-spatial production of urban sexuality in a way that draws attention to the contradictions and ambiguities of identities and sexualities without losing sight of how of ideology and power operate through them and the spaces they occupy. I then demonstrate how those ambiguities are reflected in the mainstream critical response to *Cruising*. A reading of the critical literature reveals to what extent *Cruising* unsettles the distinction between

[153] Mayne, 165.

heterosexuality and homosexuality much like William Friedkin's earlier film, *The Boys in the Band* (1970), as discussed like Joe Carrithers.[154] Sexual identity and cinematic (dis)pleasure, however, are analogous and unambiguous in Carrithers's discussion of the straight and gay male audiences of *The Boys in the Band* as they are in Will Aitken's discussion of the mainstream critical reception of *Cruising*, "Hips or Lips: *Cruising* and Critical Preference."[155] Unlike Carrithers and Aitken, the approach to film audiences that I offer here, does not attempt to resolve that tension by projecting coherence and continuity onto audience members for whom the pleasures and dangers of contradiction and discontinuity seem to precisely what draws them into space of the film.

AIDS Films

The next two chapters look at how the "melancholic audience" of three films concerning gay men and HIV/AIDS—*Parting Glances* (1986), *Longtime Companion* (1990), and *Philadelphia* (1993)—was shaped by a pervasive "elegiac consciousness" that emerged in the wake of HIV/AIDS. "Melancholic audience" is shorthand for suggesting what each of the reception texts I examine have in common. I read in each of them an echo of the type of melancholia described by Douglas Crimp when assaulted by an overwhelming sense of loss and the moralizing discourses that attempted to minimize or deny the gravity of the situation: "my version of melancholia prevented me from

[154] Joe Carrithers, "The Audiences of *The Boys in the Band*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23.2 (1995): 64-71.
[155] Will Aitken, "Hips or Lips: *Cruising* and Critical Preference," *Christopher Street* 4.9 (May 1980): 58-62.

acquiescing in and thus mourning the demise of a culture."[156] Mainstream AIDS films such as these have not always been received well by many gay scholars and AIDS activists. Bart Beaty, for example, argues that *Philadelphia* is a "reactionary" film that "is clearly not for the Gay Community but about the Gay Community."[157] Nonetheless, there is a small—but still growing—body of criticism written by gay male scholars and other professional writers that I examine here. These writers demonstrate how AIDS films enable a critical rethinking of gay male identity and desire in the wake of HIV/AIDS and also help shape and sustain cultural memories of the epidemic and the lives it has taken in ways that these gay men have found meaningful.

The first of the two chapters can be roughly divided into two sections. The first section begins by discussing AIDS films as "memory texts" as described by Martita Sturken—sites of cultural memory and the collective working through of the traumas of HIV/AIDS.[158] Sturken and Kenneth Foote both discuss how memories of trauma and loss are tied to places and Foote goes on to describe the cultural landscape as a "landshape of memory" in which certain sites become "fields of care" meant to sustain and shape a collective sense of loss while endowing those losses with historical, social, and cultural significance.[159] Much of the next chapter explores how gay men construct a landshape of memory in relation to HIV/AIDS, personal and collective memories, AIDS

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[156] Douglas Crimp, *Melancholy and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 15.
[157] Bart Beaty, "The Syndrome is the System: A Political Reading of *Longtime Companion*," in *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*, ed., James Miller (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992), 117.
[158] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 1.
[159] Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, Rev. and Updt. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1997), 9.

films, and against the marginalizing and moralizing "geography of AIDS" which operates to police social boundaries, contain infection, and protect the "general population."[160] I then explore this idea of a landshape of memory as it operates in the autobiographical writings of Andrew Holleran and David Wojarowicz in order to suggest the importance of "bearing witness" as a socially and politically significant act in the age of HIV/AIDS. The second section of this chapter focuses on several critical approaches to AIDS film audiences outlined by Kylo-Patrick Hart, Eva Cherniavsky, and Paula Treichler.[161] As AIDS film interpretations, Hart's and Cherniavsky's texts are quite compelling. As critical approaches to AIDS film audiences, I point out that both authors neglect to address that gay men have interpreted AIDS films in meaningful ways and fail to explain how that came to be. I close the chapter by elaborating on the ways in which Treichler's discussion of intertextual and extratextual relationships as they come to bear on AIDS narratives has informed my own understanding of AIDS film audiences specifically but also, more broadly, all media audiences.

The next chapter first explores how gay men negotiate identities and desires in the wake of HIV/AIDS and in relation to *Parting Glances*. The next section of this chapter is a textual analysis of *Parting Glances* that attempts to explain why Simon Watney calls the only feature film Bill Sherwood made before he died of AIDS-related causes in 1990 an "elegiac" film. This has much to do with the centrality of death and mourning in gay

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[160] Patricia Gadsby, "Mapping the Epidemic: Geography as Destiny," *Discover* 9.4 (April 1988), 28-31.
[161] Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (New York: The Haworth Press); Eva Cherniavsky, "Real Again: Melodrama and the Subject of HIV/AIDS," *GLQ* 4:3 (1998): 375-401; Paula Treichler, "AIDS Narratives on Television: Whose Story?," in *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 176-204.

culture during that period, the proliferation of elegiac expression in all types of artistic responses to HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, and it would seem to have much to due with the film's preoccupation with ghosts, memorials, and the return of the dead as well. My textual analysis of *Parting Glances* attempts to draw attention to the socio-spatial dimensions of HIV/AIDS and the landshape of memory that is so clearly evident in the articles about *Longtime Companion* and *Philadelphia*. The remainder of the chapter discusses these articles in order to explore at greater length how watching and writing about AIDS films becomes a type of bearing witness to the epidemic in which personal memories become intertwined with historical and imagined places and fictional narratives to form cultural memories. Each of the authors of the texts discussed in this section, like Crimp, refuse the easy consolations of mourning and/or forgetting.

TV Movies

The final case study will explore the "electronic audience" in relation to the television movie *Any Mother's Son* (1996) and Lifetime's Lifetime Online Internet site (www.lifetimetv.com). The term electronic audience is meant to draw attention to how the collective interpretive strategies and social interactions of these TV viewers occur within the "electronic spaces" of television and the Internet. This chapter examines viewer discourses about *Any Mother's Son* posted on Lifetime Online in order to further explore how gay men use media texts and electronic media outlets in the construction of collective identities and counterpublic spheres.

Home computers have become a tool for the production of public space, and this speaks to the issue of placelessness that the previous chapters will have explored in other

contexts. Joshua Meyrowitz has argued that electronic media have fundamentally altered public life and social behavior by unhitching social interaction from physical location, by changing the ways in which social information is transmitted, and by blurring the boundary between public and private. He writes, "our world may suddenly seem senseless to many people because, for the first time in modern history, it is relatively placeless."[162] Of course, individuals and societies adapt to new technologies relatively quickly so that what may have felt strange a generation ago seems only natural today. Nonetheless, as new forms electronic media penetrate our lives in different ways, our social experience and sense of place continues to be challenged.

Ray Oldenburg certainly worries about the senselessness of contemporary life and has argued for the necessity of "third places"—neighborhood coffee shops, bookstores, markets, bars, and the like—to stave off the deadening effects that electronic media have on public life.[163] If the social changes brought about in part by electronic media make social space and public life problematic for everyone, Oldenburg's own homophobic formulation of the third place as a refuge for exclusively heterosexual male bonding—which I interrogate in this chapter—attests to the ongoing issue of public sphere exclusion which makes public life for queers perhaps even more vexed. Other writers, such as Reuben Buford May, have focused on electronic media, specifically television, not as antithetical to public life but as a "social link" between patrons of such third

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[162] Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 308.
[163] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and the Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999).

places.[164] Still others, such as Charles Soukup, have found Oldenburg's notion of the third place as a useful way of thinking about informal social life on the Internet—which Soukup argues, at times, functions as a "virtual third place."[165] This chapter builds on the observations of Oldenburg, May, and Soukup in order to think about the ways in which Lifetime Online functions as a virtual third place in which viewers and users experience a sense of belonging through social interaction, cultivate an interest in social and political matters, and engage in informed public discussion of issues of importance. This way of thinking about commercial television websites breaks from the dominant conceptualization of them as simply a marketing tool that can be employed to maximize corporate profits exemplified by the work of Louisa Ha and Sylvia Chan-Olmstead and other "netnographers."[166]

After questioning what I think are some of the more problematic tendencies in ideological approaches to TV movies, this chapter moves on to discuss how changes in the television in the U.S. have caused the migration of TV movies from the major broadcast networks to cable networks such as Lifetime that cater to "niche" audiences across media platforms. I then discuss some of the implications this has for thinking

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[164] Reuben Buford May, "Tavern Culture and Television Viewing: The Influence of Local Viewing Culture on Patrons' Reception of Television Programs," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28.1 (Feb. 1999), 85-86.

[165] Charles Soukup, "Computer-Mediated Communication as a Virtual Third Place: Building Oldenburg's Great Good Places on the World Wide Web," *New Media & Society* 8.3 (2006): 421-440.

[166] Louisa Ha, "Enhanced Television Strategy Models: A study of Television Websites." *Internet Research: Electronic Applications and Policy* 12.3 (2002): 235-247; Louisa Ha and Sylvia Chan-Olmstead, "Cross-Media Use in Electronic Media: The Role of Cable Television Web Sites in Cable Television Network Branding and Viewership." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48.4 (Dec. 2004): 620-645. See also, Donna Hoffman, "A New Marketing Paradigm for Electronic Commerce," *The Information Society 13* (1997): 43-54; Robert V. Kozinets, "The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities," *Journal of Marketing Research 34* (Feb. 2002): 61-72.

about television as a public sphere before concluding with a discussion of how Lifetime Online users' collective interpretive practices and social interactions around *Any Mother's Son* are examples virtual third place experience in which TV provides the social link for users who log on in order to experience a sense of belonging and perhaps generate counterdiscourses about gay identities.

CONCLUSION

Mayne writes, "rather than attempt to essentialize some kind of distinct gay/lesbian spectatorship as a set of responses to a film, it is more productive to ask what the place of film spectatorship is in gay and lesbian life."[167] This dissertation traces the shifting place of both film and television viewing in gay male life in recent U.S. history. What I hope to demonstrate is that all of the media texts examined in this dissertation, even the most "negative" ones, have played a role in the formation of gay identity and have served as catalysts for the creation of gay collective identity. The implications this has for gay media criticism are significant. Spectatorship theory *may* be able to explain how media texts impact individual subjects (though what is asserted can only ever be hypothetical), yet by bracketing off the social, historical, and cultural influences that come to bear on viewing media texts, such studies leave too much unexplored. Neither can textual analysis account for the multitude of ways in which gays and lesbians have resisted, appropriated, and enjoyed media texts. To the extent that gay and lesbian scholars working within the a cultural studies maintain that "colonization" is the way to explain gay and lesbian pleasure in viewing mainstream media, their understanding of the

167 Mayne, 166.

place of media in the lives of lesbians and gays remains impoverished. Queer media theorists have begun to suggest the ways in which media texts open up a multitude of possible meanings, yet have not carefully explored how these meanings are arrived at and how they are mobilized within a cultural context. Work in gay and lesbian media reception has already been done, and it has already suggested the ways in which we can move beyond these shortcomings. This dissertation will, I hope, further demonstrate the importance of examining not only texts, but historical viewers, how they are located within social space, what they bring to viewing experience, and the impact this has on understanding the very nature of the "text." Finally, implied in all reception studies is a theory of the role of media in public life. What I hope to develop in this dissertation is a more explicit, extended, and systematic understanding of the role of media reception in the public sphere with implications not only for queers but, potentially, for all viewers.

Chapter Two: Stop (The Movie) *Cruising*: The Demonstrations and The Politicized Audience

This chapter is primarily historical and combines archival research on 1970s gay and lesbian activism in New York and San Francisco with several strands of theoretical work on urban sexuality and space in order to think critically about the emergence and impact of the protests against William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980) and the film's reception. Specifically, I explore the actions of several groups in New York City and of the "Stop the Movie *Cruising*" ad hoc committee (SMC) in San Francisco within the context of the splintering gay urban ghetto and the dissolution of the unitary gay subject. This chapter also rethinks the notion of what Judith Mayne has called the "politicized audience" in discussing the ways in which gays and lesbians challenged heterosexual cultural and spatial "authority," while highlighting the importance that space—material and imagined places—and citizenship—questions of belonging and not belonging, cultural and political legitimacy, and collective identity—have in relation to this case study and within the study of film reception more generally. By "gay ghetto" I am referring to those urban spaces that have historically had dense gay and lesbian populations and social, cultural, political, and commercial networks.

Cruising follows an undercover police detective, Steve Burns (Al Pacino), underground into the gay male S/M scene of Greenwich Village, New York, where a series of grizzly murders has taken place. A killer is stalking and slashing gay men whom he picks up in bars, alleyways, and Central Park. Steve poses as a leather man to snare the killer. The film opens with a murder. A man in black leather, whose identity is obscured, brutally stabs a man whom he has tied up face-down to a bed in a hotel room.

The film cuts to the on-going investigation into the murder spree of the unknown killer. Police Captain Edelson (Paul Sorvino), asks Steve to act as a decoy, primarily, he is told, because he resembles the murder victims. Steve takes the assignment and leaves behind his girlfriend Nancy (Karen Allen) whom he cannot tell about the investigation. Steve moves into the Village and befriends his gay next-door neighbor, Ted Bailey (Don Scarvino), who ends up the film's final victim. There are two more murders in the course of the film. One occurs in Central Park and the other in an X-rated peepshow. After arresting the wrong suspect, Steve crosses paths with Stewart Richards (Richard Cox), a Columbia graduate student, who, it is suggested, has a pathological hatred of his father and who commits the murders out of an overwhelming sense of guilt and confusion about his own sexual identity. Steve kills Stewart in Central Park, when the cop and the killer have their final confrontation, and, with the murder's identity discovered, Steve returns to the apartment he shares with Nancy. The ambiguous ending implies that Steve has been deeply affected by his experiences in the gay S/M scene, and may now have assumed the role of killer. Ted is dead, and while it is never stated outright, Steve may have been the one to kill him.[1]

Richard Bourne has argued that the protests against *Cruising* were a response to the film's depictions of gay men and their sexuality. Specifically, the protestors found the depiction of gay desire as "infectious" and "murderous" and the lack of gay characters not engaged in kinky and risky sexual practices of a "seedy underworld"

[1] The theme of homosexuality as "contagion" was mentioned by several critics, gay and straight, at the time of the film's release and has dominated the critical discussion of the film after 1980.

objectionable.[2] These depictions cannot account for the protests against the film as the protests occurred as the filming began and before anyone had actually viewed *Cruising*. Only some of the protestors had read drafts of the script for the film. Arthur Bell was the first to vehemently object to what he felt was its exploitative and inflammatory representation of gay sexuality. Still, this was not the first time that gay desire had been depicted as kinky, infectious, or murderous. For example, earlier that year, 1979, Felice Picano published his novel, *The Lure*, which also told the story of a straight undercover cop on assignment in New York investigating a series of gay murders. Coming into contact with the seedy underground world of gay sex somehow turns him, as it does Steve in *Cruising*, into a homosexual and a killer. No one protested when *The Lure* was published, even though its themes are strikingly similar to those of *Cruising*. That is because the protests against *Cruising* were as much, if not more, about the politics of space, than the politics of representation.

In order to make an argument about the spatial politics of *Cruising*, its determinations, and impact, this chapter discusses protests in both Greenwich Village and the Castro District in the 1970s. The protests were not always welcomed, and the gay and lesbian presses sometimes framed them as locally disruptive, contributing to a growing sense of division and hostility in Greenwich Village and the Castro. The protests are also at times described as politically progressive and nationally significant. The demonstrations represent one important stage in the formation of a national political counterpublic opposed to the "New Right." In this context, protesting *Cruising* is an

[2] Richard Bourne, "Why Did the Film *Cruising* Lead to Protests?," Available online, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/rdb0201.doc>.

attempt to code "gay space" differently from both the emerging gay and lesbian geographies formed by local, specialized identity politics and the discourse of the national "imagined community." Before turning to a discussion of the protests and the film's reception, however, it is important to explain what is meant by the "politicized audience" and the third space of reception.

THE POLITICIZED AUDIENCE AND THE THIRD SPACE OF RECEPTION

> Lefebvre is suspicious of the mirror because it cannot elaborate the ways in which a field of vision situates things but does not unify them. A better metaphor, here, would be "theatrical space" which describes how authors, actors, audiences, characters, scripts and stages are brought together but never constitute a unity. Indeed, the "theater" represents a "third space" between dualisms such as public/private, seen/unseen, fictitious/real, experienced/perceived.[3]

Judith Mayne argues that the politicized audience is "the specter haunting spectatorship studies . . . and one of film theory's most persistent fantasies is the fusion of critical spectatorship and political engagement."[4] Mayne is cautioning against the tendency to assume or suggest that "contestatory" viewing practices constitute or result in political activity. She claims, in other words, nothing is necessarily political, let alone politically oppositional, about watching movies. Similarly, nothing is inherently political or oppositional in being gay or lesbian. Therefore, Mayne approaches the issues of critical spectatorship and gay and lesbian audiences carefully. First, is the obvious problem of potentially essentializing gay and lesbian if we begin to look for common responses to cinema in isolation from historical and social forces that may shape them.

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[3] Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 161.
[4] Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 165.

Obviously, a complex range of differences cut through gay and lesbian collectivity, and, given that interpretations are always situated within the subject's various complex social surroundings, there can be no singular response among gay men, lesbians, or gay men *and* lesbians to any given film. "Unfortunately," writes Mayne, "those critical of the so-called 'identity politics' . . . assume too quickly that an essential homosexual identity is what is affirmed and desired."[5] Thus, this chapter is less concerned with finding *the* gay male and lesbian response to *Cruising* than with describing the range of meanings attributed to the film and situating these responses socially and spatially.

However, an even more pressing issue is involved in the study of gay and lesbian critical spectatorship than conflicting interpretations. On the one hand, the examples of gay and lesbian spectatorship that Mayne discusses do not differ much from classical spectatorship.[6] That is, identification, fantasy, affect, and other aspects of film viewing operate similarly in spite of the differences that sexuality makes. What constitutes *critical* spectatorship, then, becomes a problem. On the other hand, the activities of the politicized audience, or "the militant actions taken against films that engage in homophobic portrayals have less to do with spectatorship than with controlling the kinds of images seen."[7] Thus, what constitutes *spectatorship* is a problem. Mayne seems to want to bracket off the politicized audience from spectatorship research for several reasons. First, in the cases Mayne points to, *Cruising* and *Basic Instinct* (1992), the

[5] Mayne, 167.
[6] Mayne, 165.
[7] Mayne, 165.

interpretations held by the protestors were "based initially on scripts, not on finished films."[8] That is, meanings were ascribed to the films outside of the context of screening them, and spectatorship studies focus primarily on the psychic, and to a lesser degree, social aspects of viewing activities. However, since I am concerned here with how the construction of urban space and sexualities and how the public debates about the film prior to its release provided a "horizon of meaning" for the viewing of *Cruising*, I find it too limiting to focus solely on the practices of viewing.

Mayne sets aside the politicized audience because such activism has "far less to do with how films are seen and consumed and far more to do with how they are produced."[9] She seems to assume that only the "work" of spectatorship is creative and productive and that the politicized audience's intention is simply censorious and prohibitive. Moreover, she neglects that what the protestors were most concerned with was not the film itself, but, rather, the ways in which others could view it. Protestors were concerned with the film's reception. Specifically, some were concerned that viewers would read the film metonymically, mistaking part of gay culture for gay culture in its entirety.[10] All of the activists who protested *Cruising* were attempting to alter or disrupt its production. Not all of the protestors, however, agreed on whether or not the film should be censored, and debates within gay and lesbian circles occurred about this.

[8] Mayne, 164.
[9] Mayne, 164.
[10] My gratitude to Laurie Schulze for framing the issue in these terms.

Cruising was, of course, released nationwide in spite of the efforts to stop it. Shortly after it opened and the reviewers commented on the film, an article in the New York periodical, *Christopher Street*, noted that in addition to the "peculiar responses of the critics" what was most interesting about the film was "the tremendous effect gays had upon its making, marketing, and reception (both critical and popular)."[11] Although a number of critics have suggested how the protestors managed to influence the filmmakers, the impact the politicized audience had on *Cruising* will not be found in "the film itself," the absences it produced, in what was altered or elided. The protestors of *Cruising* are crucial participants in the production of the film's meaning. The protests should not been seen as simply repressive, creating a lack in the text or an enforced silence in public due to their attempt to "control the types of images seen." Simply put, there is not a preexistent text over which the politicized audience exerts its power. The politicized audience is one component of a highly complex web of relations that work to produce the meanings of the text and the context in which it can come to be understood. Focusing solely on spectators, when narrowly defined, might turn our attention away from the ways in which, as discussed in the introduction, media texts generate meaning outside of the act of viewing them.

There is a certain ambiguity in the "third space" of the gay ghetto, gay hypermasculinity, sadomasochism, and their representation in *Cruising* that opens the film up to numerous "double-edged" readings and pleasures. A handbill distributed by the SMC during protests against the film called it a "straight film about gay life that

[11] Will Aitken, "Hips or Lips: *Cruising* and Critical Preference," *Christopher Street* 4.9 (May 1980), 58.

makes the whole scene queer."[12] What this might connote today is most likely not what the demonstrators intended. Nonetheless, it is crucial to think about the ways in which the experience of *Cruising* might queer assumptions about sexuality, identity, and space.

The meanings ascribed to *Cruising* by the gay and lesbian activists who protested the film and the wider audience were the result of a number of historical and social circumstances converging at the time of the film's production and release: the political economy of gay ghetto life in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the shrinking of the national public sphere and the heteronormativity of the "New Right," and debates within the gay and lesbian public sphere over changing masculinities and the increasing visibility of sadomasochism. It was the way that *Cruising* activated these tensions within gay and lesbian culture and at a time when gays and lesbians understood that they were facing a backlash that made the film such a contested issue. The controversy grew to unprecedented portions not simply because it promised to be a homophobic film, however, but because of the unique circumstances of its filming in Greenwich Village.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Cruising was one of several American films under attack by political groups in 1980. A coalition of gay and lesbian and feminist organizations had denounced *Windows* (1979) for its homophobic depiction of lesbian desire. *The Sentinel* reported that "scores of lesbians and gay men turned out on January 18 in New York to picket the opening night of *Windows*. Since that time protests of the film have continued to mount."[13]

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[12] "Whistle Stop the Movie Cruising." Handbill. GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Ephemera Files. "Stop the Movie Cruising" File.
[13] "U.A. Announces that *Windows* Will Not Open in Bay Area," *The Sentinel*. 22 Feb 1980: 1.

Indignant gays and lesbians confronted the Transamerica Corporation in San Francisco when its subsidiary, United Artists, chose to distribute the film featuring a psychotic lesbian. In response, Transamerica decided not to release the film in Bay Area theaters. Transamerica Vice President, Jane Hall, explained the decision was "purely economical" but would not comment on the rash of protests in the city, the bomb threats against the Transamerica building, or picket lines that had formed outside of Transamerica President, James Harvey's home in Pacific Heights.[14]

Feminist organizations around the country protested the graphic depiction of violence against women in Brian DePalma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), which featured Michael Caine as a deeply disturbed, cross-dressing psychiatrist who stalked and murdered female patients who aroused his repressed desires. San Francisco's Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media (WAVPM) circulated a handbill which read: "From the insidious combination of violence and sexuality in its promotional material to scene after scene of women raped, killed, or nearly killed, *Dressed to Kill* is a masterwork of misogyny."[15] WAVPM, also instrumental in the protests against *Cruising* and *Windows*, set these three films up as a sort of triple threat: "*Dressed to Kill* follows a new trend in films: witness the gay killer of *Cruising*, the lesbian rapist of *Windows* and now the killer transvestite of *Dressed to Kill*."[16]

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[14] These protests were organized by the local "Coalition to Stop the Movie *Windows*" and a photograph of the picketers outside of Harvey's home was featured on the front page of *The Bay Area Reporter* on March 13, 1980.
[15] Reprinted in "Dressed to Kill Protested" *Jump Cut 23* (Oct 1980): 32.
[16] "Dressed to Kill Protested" 32.

Charles Lyons situates this rash of protests against Hollywood in 1980 within the context of the demise of the Hollywood Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1968 and the "liberalization" of Hollywood films and, more broadly, the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. With the decline of the PCA and the Production Code which, among other things, placed restrictions on the representation of "perversion" and the institution of the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings system, more overt depictions of homosexuality were permissible.[17] The decline of the PCA, for Lyons, was partially the result of the political changes and liberal attitudes ushered in during the 1960s, yet the films after 1968 which offered homosexual characters and themes "did not represent real progress at all, but rather a continuation of the treatment of homosexuality as seen through heterosexual eyes."[18] Joe Carrithers uses William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band* (1970) to make a similar point. Carrithers claims that the play, performed in 1968, and the film, released two years later, are practically identical, in spite of the drastic social changes that had occurred in the interim. What dominates beliefs about gay men before the Stonewall Inn riots in 1969, that they are "failed men," guilt-ridden, neurotic, lonely, and pathetic, is perpetuated and confirmed in the film and others like it.[19] Given the predominance of these stereotypes, the critique of heteronormativity is a common

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[17] For a discussion of Hollywood and the Production Code Administration, see, for example: Leonard J. Neff and Jerold L. Simmons, *Dame in a Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990); Gerald C. Gardner, *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters From the Hays Office, 1934 To 1968* (New York: Dodd, 1987); Lea Jacobs, *The Wages Of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991. For a revisionist look at the representation of gays and lesbians during the production code years see, Chon Noriega, "Something's Missing Here!: Homosexuality, and Film Reviews During the Production Code Era, 1934-1962," *Cinema Journal* 30.1 (Fall 1991).

[18] Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997), 293.

[19] Joe Carrithers, "The Audiences of *The Boys in the Band*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23.2 (1995): 69.

tendency in much gay and lesbian film criticism of the period.[20] Maybe even more than political criticism, however, "protests against mainstream movies became one highly visible way of challenging heterosexuals' cultural authority to construct homosexual identity," and the most visible and volatile protests against motion pictures in the United States in 1980 were in response to *Cruising*.[21]

In October 1979, gays and lesbians marched in the nation's capital. *The Advocate* quotes then Co-Director of the National Gay Task Force Lucia Valeska as saying, "It was spectacular—the morale and spirit were very high. We've had local gay groups and national organizations before, but never this. It symbolizes the birth of a national gay movement."[22] The late 1970s were both politically exhilarating and troubling years for gays and lesbians. By the end of the decade, the gay and lesbian presses were publishing numerous articles attempting to explain what had gone "wrong," why gays and lesbians suddenly seemed to be losing political ground.[23] In June of 1977, Dade county voters in Florida repealed a gay-rights ordinance in a fight lead by Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" organization. In her 1977 book about the "threat of militant homosexuality," *The Anita Bryant Story*, Bryant wrote that it "is shocking to realize how many legislators

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[20] See, for example, Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (London: BFI, 1977); Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Mary Richards, "The Gay Deception," *Film Comment* (Jan 1982): 15-18; Simon Watney, "Hollywood's Homosexual World," *Screen* 22.3-4 (1982): 107-121.

[21] Lyons, 292.

[22] Scott Anderson, "A Monumental March Marks a Big Moment in Gay History," *The Advocate* 29 Nov. 1979: 7.

[23] For example, Bill Beardemphl, "Ten Years of Politics: From the Closets To the Barricades To an Uncertain Tomorrow," *Bay Area Reporter* 16 Apr 1980: 19; Priscilla Alexander, "Ten Years That Changed the World, Why Are They Changing Back?," *Bay Area Reporter* 10 Apr 1980: 24; C. W. Ellis, "Gay Lib Doesn't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows," *Bay Area Reporter* 10 Apr 1980: 22.

have capitulated to the demands of the outspoken defenders of homosexuals. Perhaps the most disturbing thing of all is the suddenness with which the 'gay' liberationists have surfaced as a full-fledged social-protest movement."[24] Amid the attacks against gays and lesbians by Anita Bryant and other Christian conservatives such as Jesse Helms, in early 1978, John Briggs introduced the "Briggs Initiative" in California which, if it had passed, would have prevented gays and lesbians or anyone "advocating" homosexuality from teaching in the public schools. The Oklahoma House of Representatives passed a similar bill months later. In November of 1978, Dan White, a disgruntled former San Francisco police officer, shot and killed San Francisco mayor George Moscone and Harvey Milk, the openly gay San Francisco city supervisor. White's conviction on manslaughter rather than murder charges set off riots in San Francisco in May 1979, only two months before protestors took to the streets to disrupt the filming of *Cruising* in Manhattan. In June 1979, Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, an organization that vocally opposed gays and lesbians, feminists, pornographers, abortion advocates, and Communists.

Shortly after the release of *Cruising*, gays become the subject of an exploitative *Time* article entitled, "The Gay World's Leather Fringe" (which will be discussed at length in the following chapter) and a CBS television documentary called *Gay Power, Gay Politics*, which, while promising to explore the growing political power of gays and lesbians in San Francisco, according to Leigh Rutledge "focused obsessively on . . . sadomasochism, transvestitism, and public sex in the city's parks" and not the gay and

[24] Anita Bryant, *The Anita Bryant Story: The Survival of Our Nation's Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1977), 99.

lesbian political movement in San Francisco.[25] The airing of the program caused demonstrations in L.A. and San Francisco before the FCAA cited CBS for biased and unfair reporting. Pat Robertson, having recently formed the Christian Broadcast Network, led a "Washington for Jesus" rally in the nation's Capitol. Thus, *Cruising* appeared at a time when gays and lesbians were affecting political change, however tentative, but were also facing a substantial opposition. In this context, *Cruising* emerged in the minds of the protestors as further evidence of growing national backlash against gays and lesbians that began in 1977. Taking a stand against the film, as will become evident, became a way of contesting the marginalization of gays and lesbians in U.S. social and political public spheres.[26]

GREENWICH VILLAGE

When the crew of *Cruising* began its second week of shooting on location in Greenwich Village, they were greeted by hordes of angry protestors. The week before, Arthur Bell, a high profile columnist for the *Village Voice*, claimed after reading an early draft of the script, that the film "promises to be the most oppressive, ugly, and bigoted look at homosexuality ever presented on the screen, the worst possible nightmare of the most uptight straights and a validation of Anita Bryant's hate campaign."[27] Bell's article and his appearance on ABC morning television in New York were both marked by

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[25] Leigh Rutledge. *The Gay Decades: From Stonewall to the Present: The People and Events that Shaped Gay Lives* (New York: Plume, 1992), 151.
[26] For a contemporary perspective on this "backlash," see, for example, Doug Ireland, "Open Season on Gays," *The Nation* 15 Sept 1979: 207-210; Dennis Altman, "The Movement and Its Enemies," *The Homosexualization of America, The Americanization of the Homosexual* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982) 108-145.
[27] Arthur Bell, "Bell Tells," *Village Voice* 16 July 1979: 36.

appeals to gays and lesbians in Greenwich Village to take action against the film. He writes, "I implore readers . . . to give Friedkin and his production crew a terrible time if you spot them in your neighborhood."[28] Shortly after, gay and lesbian New Yorkers took to the streets over the course of several nights in numbers ranging from a few hundred to one thousand.

Bell's article may well have been the catalyst for the demonstrations that overtook the streets of Greenwich Village for several days, but this kind of activism was not unknown in New York City. The Stonewall riots in 1969, of course, more than any other event, mark the emergence of the gay and lesbian liberation movement. But the "radical" gay liberation movement that emerged after Stonewall was, according to John D'Emilio, short-lived, retreating by the second half of the 1970s as newer liberal, reform-oriented gay and lesbian organizations appeared and took prominence, as the political and economic changes of the 1970s brought about a period of conservatism and retrenchment, and as lesbians and people of color began to understand the limited ways in which gay liberation addressed their own experiences.[29]

While the predominant gay and lesbian political engagement in that decade sought the liberal ideals of inclusion and equality for gays and lesbians, they still often "remained bold and brazen," using the same "unruly tactics" as the gay liberationists whom they had come to overshadow.[30] "The movement had grown larger in size," according to D'Emilio, "yet its political framework, and hence its possibilities, had

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[28] Bell, "Bell Tells," 36.
[29] John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 245.
[30] D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 247.

contracted. The goals of activists had narrowed, yet the activists in the mid-1970s almost uniformly displayed an élan that made them feel as if they were mounting the barricades."[31] It was in this context that the protestors in New York set out to confront the cast and crew of *Cruising*.

The New York Times reported that lesbians and gay men marched defiantly through the streets of Greenwich Village after a "noisy protest" in Sheriden Square organized by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) on July 25, 1979.[32] The rally took place when Mayor Ed Koch refused to listen to the NGLTF's demands that the city withdraw its support for the filmmakers and back the "large segment of his constituency" that opposed the production of the film.[33] Koch dismissed the protestors, stating publicly that revoking the necessary permits would constitute a form of censorship.[34] This was the first of a series of protests that went unabated for three consecutive nights:

> It was the closest thing to a long, hot summer this city's seen. . . . All week the Village rang with the rampage of gay people who had anything but *Cruising* on their minds. They blocked Sixth Avenue, Seventh Avenue, West Street, 14th Street. They threw bottles and bricks, smashed windows, slammed into cars and trucks. The sixth precinct was busier than any time since Stonewall.[35]

The public demonstrations against *Cruising* brought together a coalition of gay and lesbian groups including the NGLTF and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA). Clearly, the demonstrators were attempting to disrupt the filming and push the project

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[31] D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 248.
[32] "Protestors Call the Film Cruising Anti-Homosexual," *The New York Times* 26 July 1979: B7.
[33] "Protestors," B7.
[34] Les Ledbetter, "1,000 in 'Village' Renew Protests," *The New York Times* 27 July 1979: B2.
[35] Richard Goldstein, "Why the Village Went Wild," *Village Voice* 5 Aug 1979: 18.

over-budget. The daily shooting schedule was leaked to protestors, who showed up shouting and blowing whistles and using lights and mirrors to frustrate attempts at filming.[36] Riot police were brought in and barricades were set up to keep the protestors at a distance. A number of the local bars quickly backed out of their agreement with Jerry Weintraub to permit shooting on the premises due to the protests and the possible economic repercussions of appearing to support the project.[37] Weintraub and Friedkin had originally planned on shooting the bar scenes in an S/M club called The Mineshaft, which Weintraub dubbed the "sleaziest bar in the world," but when The Mineshaft broke their contract, the filmmakers had to construct a replica of the bar, called The Cockpit in the film, located, by some accounts, in the basement of a nearby building.[38] The scenes in The Cockpit were some of the most remarked upon moments in the film.

While the leather and non-leather scenes were interdependent parts of the gay ghetto, they were, often, at odds. The protests against the film reveal the tensions between the two and demonstrate the degree to which the changing gender norms and sexual codes of conduct that found expression at the Mineshaft were as threatening to some gays as they were to most straights. John Rechy described two reasons for the protests: "the first is that [*Cruising*] may unleash a wave of violence against homosexuals and the second is that i[t]s concentration on the elements of *Cruising*,

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[36] Goldstein, 16.
[37] Dale Pollack, "*Cruising* in 'War Zone': Finished on Sked, Bow Set," *Variety* 12 Sept. 1979: 44.
[38] Thomas D. Clagett, *William Friedkin: Films of Aberration, Obsession, and Reality* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 1990), 198; Pollack, 44; Goldstein, 16.

leather bars, and sadomasochism may result in a distortion of all homosexuals by focusing on only a small segment."[39]

For their critics, some protestors' belief that a film could have such a direct impact on audiences as to incite violence against gays and lesbians seemed naïve at best. Aside from the long-standing conviction in the causal connection between screen violence and social violence in both popular and academic criticism, the riots that year in theaters across the country after screenings of *The Warriors* (1979) and the alleged murders connected to the film left some with no doubt that films could lead to violence, and, like *The Warriors*, here was another potentially brutal film set on the streets of New York City. This time the portrayed victims were a population already sensitized to the effects of violence in their everyday lives. For others, including Rechy, the possibility that the film would lead to an increase in violence against gays and lesbians seemed far less grave than the consequences of what amounted to condoning censorship. Still others suggested that the film would not incite violence but expose the violence that was inflicted on gays and lesbians by the police, homophobes, and other gays and lesbians.

The filmmakers responded by suggesting that the film would make more visible the vitality and dangers of gay culture and would create a greater understanding. Friedkin, for example, told Vito Russo, "I have no doubt that this film will help alleviate the violence against gays in this country. I honestly feel that a compassionate feeling will emerge for the characters in this picture. I also think that *Cruising*, in its depiction of sexuality, will turn a lot of people on."[40]

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[39] John Rechy, "A Case for *Cruising*," *Village Voice* 5 Aug. 1979: 18.
[40] Vito Russo, "*Cruising*: The Controversy Continues," *New York* 13 Aug. 1979: 49.

Weintraub claimed that in retrospect he believed that the film would serve as an object lesson for unsuspecting gays who set out to explore the sexual side New York: "I felt that it would help because if a kid got off the bus from Duluth, Minnesota, he wouldn't make a beeline for those bars first thing until he learned what the city was all about—the danger."[41] Thus, the debate around the "effects" of *Cruising* was, from the outset, not whether it would have any at all, but which "effects" it would have.

In addition to the concern that *Cruising* would incite violence against gays and lesbians, the protestors were also concerned that the film would "distort" gays lives by only focusing on the "fringes." This points to the tensions between political activists and the growing number of gay men who participated in the burgeoning network of commercialized gay sexual culture in New York, yet distanced themselves from political culture and political activism. While gay activists "experienced no end of frustration with the seemingly apolitical stance of these 'new' gay men," these "new" gay men grew weary of the "grim politicos who just didn't know how to have fun."[42] The filmmakers attempted to respond to the activists' complaints with the inclusion of a disclaimer that appeared at the beginning of the film: "This film is not an indictment of the homosexual world. It is set in one small segment of that world, which is not meant to be representative of the whole." The filmmakers repeatedly stressed in interviews that they had captured that "segment" with great verisimilitude, "distorting" nothing. Weintraub told the press, "I'm not putting anything in this film that doesn't take place every day and

[41] Clagett, 197.
[42] D'Emilio, *Making History*, 251.

every night. This is not fiction, what we're doing, this is truth."[43] Neither did Friedkin question his ability to capture "truth." "Those scenes could be run as documentary footage. . . . There's no doubt in my mind that this picture won't provoke violence against gays, but I think that that it might well provoke more men into this kind of life. It's there. It exists. It's the truth."[44] *Cruising* is not, of course, a documentary, though were it, the connection between "truth" and representation would, of course, still be more complicated than it is depicted here, but the issue of verisimilitude, in addition to effects, becomes another key trope at work in the film's reception.

Rather than focusing on the "truth" or "distortion" of the signifiers of urban gay hypermasculinity, S/M, and public sex that the film incorporates, however, I want to suggest that what is most important to understand is their fundamental ambiguity. Urban sexuality has what Steve Pile refers to as a "double-edginess." There is always a moment of possibility and desire and a moment of threat and dread in any urban sexual encounter.[45] For some, this "double-edginess" has a liberatory potential; for others, it is a sign of disorder and the need for increased control. Those spaces most-often associated with sexual minorities certainly tend to elicit these contradictory codings. As locations of conflicting codings, these spaces become, for Lawrence Knopp, echoing Henri Lefebvre, "sites of *multiple* struggles and contradictions, and as such are instrumental in producing,

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[43] Qtd. in Russo, "*Cruising*," 49.
[44] Qtd. in Russo, "*Cruising*," 49.
[45] Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 236.

reproducing and transforming both social relations of various kinds . . . and space itself."[46]

Having stated their case, that *Cruising* could create a climate in which violence against gays and lesbians was acceptable and that the film could potentially "misrepresent" gay urban life, the demonstrators nonetheless failed to gain the support of the Mayor's office. Their frustration with the refusal of city officials to revoke the filming permits and deny the crew special accommodations was compounded by the filmmakers' refusal to allow them to consult with Friedkin and Weintraub on more recent versions of the script as the filmmakers dismissed the protestor's claims in the press by pointing out that they had only read an early draft and were, moreover, drawing the wrong conclusions from it.[47] Friedkin told the *New York Times* that, "'the motivations of the people who are behind this thing are highly questionable to me.'"[48] The *New York Times* pointed out that the film's detractors had not seen the actual script, but had repeatedly asked to review it.[49] Friedkin repeatedly refused to supply one. Weintraub told *Variety*, "I have no intention of letting them or anyone else see our script. They have no right to try to stop our making this picture."[50]

Friedkin and Weintraub's refusal to engage in a dialogue with the protestors was framed as a First Amendment issue in which they became the defenders of "free speech." Janet Maslin asked Friedkin if his project was exploitative, and he responded "no . . . . It

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[46] Lawrence Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis," in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, eds. David Bell and Gil Valentine (New York: Routledge, 1995), 153.
[47] Stephen Klain, "UA Mum Re Lorimar's *Cruising*," *Variety* 1 Aug 1979: 32.
[48] Janet Maslin, "*Cruising* Defended by Friedkin," *The New York Times* 6 Feb 1980: C19.
[49] Maslin, C19.
[50] "Manhattan Homosexual Circles Fight Lorimar's *Cruising* Pic," *Variety* 25 July 1979: 34.

certainly is not. The vast majority of gay people are more in danger of the kind of totalitarianism that would want to ban the picture than of anything else."[51] According to *Variety*,

> Freedom of expression was the key issue in the *Cruising* protest Weintraub argues. He said the protests were unfounded . . . . Despite the script elements, Weintraub describes himself as surprised by the extent and ferocity of the protests, "I don't think anybody in their right mind would have expected it, and especially from the gay community, where freedom of expression is so important to their lives."[52]

For Weintraub, the protests *themselves* were "in direct violation of the First Amendment."[53]

The protestors' feeble attempts at censoring the film became a selling point in its publicity campaign which, *Variety* explained, "pulled out all the stops to combine appeals to First Amendment freedoms of expression with rhetoric aimed at a more gut-level."[54] The advertisement which appeared in *The New York Times* on the day of the film's wide-release featured a dark close-up of Al Pacino staring off to the side of the camera below the caption, "Al Pacino is *Cruising* for a killer," and next to a highly-visible disclaimer which warned: "Due to the intense and sensitive subject matter discretion is advised for younger audiences." A previous full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* that featured a telegram sent to Weintraub from theater chain owner, A. Alan Feinberg, attempted to frame the exhibition of the film as an act of integrity and courage. The telegram read, in part, "I feel we have a right, if not an obligation, to offer a diversity of

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[51] Maslin, C19.
[52] Pollack 44.
[53] Qtd. in Clagett 197.
[54] Stephen Klain, "Weintraub to Media: Fan Dispute, But Hold Your Critics," *Variety* 6 Feb 1980: 4.

film fare irrespective of our personal tastes and preferences." A United Artist's statement distributed at the press screening for *Cruising* emphasized free choice: "At a time when individual dignity and the right to decide for oneself are so important to be encouraged, United Artists invites individual movie goers to see *Cruising* and evaluate it for themselves."[55] While the film's publicity attempted to capitalize on the scandal created by the protests, in the press, Friedkin attempted to discredit the protestors as a "group of angry fanatics. . . . A legitimate group with legitimate interests does not threaten to kill you."[56] These are sentiments that a number of gay men seemed to share.

The comments of the gay extras that appeared in *Cruising* quoted in both the popular gay and mainstream presses also tended to frame the production of the film in terms of free speech. In an interview with *Mandate*, Rod Morgan claimed:

> Arthur Bell himself has always supported gay freedom. Freedom has to include freedom to go to The Mineshaft and freedom to make the movie *Cruising*. Why don't the protestors put the energy where it would matter? I have a lot of respect for Arthur Bell, but this time he is wrong. You can't stop creative expression.[57]

Morgan's comment is a defense of freedom of speech, but it is also a defense of the leather scene and the place of the "sexual fringe" in the increasingly mainstream gay and lesbian political struggle that many felt was the issue really at stake.

During the protests in New York, demonstrators faced off with the gay actors involved in *Cruising*. Vito Russo remembers one afternoon when "extras were filing out of The Cockpit, after a sweaty day in the dark. A crowd of protestors yell 'Traitors!' at

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[55] Klain, 4.
[56] Maslin "Friedkin" C12.
[57] John Devere, "The Men of Cruising," *Mandate* Feb 1980: 18.

the costumed men as they file into a waiting bus."[58] A number of the extras, in turn, attempted to dismiss the protestors, labeling them "emotionally disturbed militants, fat dykes, and sissy fluffs."[59] This kind of antagonism among gay men, which was not initiated but certainly exacerbated by the appearance of the filmmakers in New York, signals a collective sense of identity crisis. Arnie Karnowitz wrote in *The Advocate* after the film's release, "At least one of my friends no longer considers himself to be part of the gay community. The alienation of gays from one another is the real cost of the political response to *Cruising*."[60] A growing sense of ambivalence about the "gay community" is echoed in Clif Coleman's *Mandate* interview: "The friend with me on the set didn't even want to spend the night in New York, he felt such gay hostility. He went home to New Jersey. I'm glad the filming is over, so my life on Christopher Street can get back to normal."[61]

The "alienation" some felt because of the demonstrations goes back to the tensions D'Emilio described between gay activists and the seemingly apolitical gay men who populated Greenwich Village. "Normal," as it is employed in the quote above, can suggest the desire for a certain camaraderie and harmony, but it also suggests the degree to which "politics" was seen as an intrusion into an otherwise non-politicized space. Given that these men had to confront hostile police forces with less frequency and given that they had adopted the "gay pride" fostered by the gay and lesbian liberation movement, these men believed that they could be "open about their 'lifestyle' on the

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[58] Russo 49.
[59] John Devere, "On the Set of *Cruising*," *Mandate* Feb 1980: 49.
[60] Arnie Karnowitz, "What Has *Cruising* Cost the Gay Community?," *The Advocate* 17 Apr 1980: 19.
[61] Qtd. in Devere "The Men" 14.

street . . . free from harassment and punishment" and that "this was incontrovertible evidence that they were free."[62] This situation, of course, would soon change, as gay men and lesbians responded to the AIDS crisis and the very commercial culture which seemed to resist "politics" proved to be a "seedbed for a consciousness that would be susceptible to political mobilization."[63] It is significant that those who felt targeted and marginalized by the protestors, or those who did not sympathize with their fight, tended to criticize the "gay community."

As Kath Weston writes, the "imagined gay community" fixed the image of its member as white, wealthy, and male, and this was proving too narrow. Those who experienced its limitations responded in several ways: revision, disaffiliation, and niche formation.[64] That is, they would attempt to create a new, more inclusive image of the "generic" gay subject, reject the "gay community" outright, or create "subformations" within it based on different identifications. It is easy to understand Morgan's statement as an attempt to persuade readers that the gay leather scene has a legitimate place within gay culture, thus expanding its borders, while Karnowitz and Coleman clearly articulate a dissatisfaction, their own or another's, that culminates in disaffiliation. These struggles are over both identity and space. Anthony Cohen points out that boundaries define social groups. When "actual geo-social boundaries" are blurred, confused, or threatened, their assertion becomes more marked and aggressive.[65] The failure of "community" brought

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[62] D'Emilio, *Making History*, 251.
[63] D'Emilio, *Making History*, 251.
[64] Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," *GLQ* 2.3 (1995), 273.
[65] Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 50.

about by gay urban migration blurred the boundaries of Greenwich Village (and the Castro) through a growing diversification, while the exposure which *Cruising* promised to give Greenwich Village was seen by some as a guarantee of the eradication of those borders and the protection they provided, thus, threatening its very existence. The protests can be understood as this type of aggressive reassertion of the "right" to space as can the responses of those who objected to the protests.

While Rechy clearly points to two of the reasons behind the protests—the threat of violence and the concern over "misrepresentation"—he neglects what is perhaps the most important and in some ways the most obvious reason why the demonstrations in New York erupted: the presence of the filmmakers in Greenwich Village gave the demonstrators the ability to actually confront them on "their own turf." One recurring sentiment in the gay and lesbian press in New York during the filming of *Cruising* is that the presence of the filmmakers was not wanted. One protestor declared during a rally, "We have to fight back in the streets. I'll defend the right of those hacks to make their film but not on our streets with our people."[66] Richard Goldstein wrote that "most of the demonstrators do not intend to stop William Friedkin from making his film; they just want him out of the neighborhood. Let him make *Cruising* in the studio."[67] The protests were clearly as much about how and where the film was produced as it was about the script.

Significantly, Jeffrey Escoffier refers to the late 1970s as the "territorial economy" stage in the development of the homo-political economy in the U.S., a period

[66] Russo, 47.
[67] Goldstein, 18.

marked by the emergence and maturation of gay and lesbian social and economic institutions. Escoffier is discussing the emergence of the gay ghetto, which, for him, is a "spatial and economic form of containment—in other words, it tends to function as a collective closet."[68] Indeed, a number of the protestors' critics suggested that they desired for "certain subjects of homosexual life [to] remain hidden—especially that of sadomasochism."[69] Rechy, and others, were criticizing the protestors for suggesting that some things are better off kept within the confines of the ghetto's semi-publicity. Alexander Wilson points out that the very notion of the ghetto is being critiqued during this period and a major point in those debates were the ways in which ghetto life enabled the economic exploitation of gays and lesbians.[70] The protestors clearly object to the mayor's catering to the economic interests of the city and the filmmakers over the needs and desires of the residents of Greenwich Village.[71] Goldstein, for example, criticized the mayor's Office for Motion Pictures and Television for doing "everything to cooperate with the filmmakers short of paying them to work here" and quoted Nancy Little, the city's movie scout, as saying, "anything that brings in $7 million is good for New York."[72]

John Davis illustrates how there is a material basis for the politics of place. "Bundles of interests," including security, amenity, and autonomy, are fostered within localities and can motivate collective action when these interests are challenged or

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[68] Jeffrey Escoffier, *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998), 75.
[69] Rechy, 20.
[70] Alexander Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*, Ghetto Politics, Gay Sexuality," *Social Text 4* (1981), 106.
[71] For a theoretical discussion of the various roles city officials have played in the social conflicts of the 1980s, see, Elaine Sharp, "Culture Wars and City Politics: Local Government's Role in Social Conflict," *Urban Affairs Review* 31.6 (July 1996): 738-758.
[72] Goldstein 18.

undermined.[73] The more precarious a group's interests appear, the greater the potential for people with similar stakes to act collectively against those with different interests in order to change the ways in which places are structured economically, politically, and socially. In respect to *Cruising*, the City's decision not to consult with the Community Planning Board prior to granting Lorimar permission to shoot in Greenwich Village or to consider the impact that the filming would have on residents, became a major factor behind the protests because it demonstrated just how precarious was the autonomy—the control and power groups have in the collective development and use of their living spaces—of the residents.[74]

No doubt the residents thought that the filmmakers spoiled the amenities which Greenwich Village offered—or the quality of life experienced in a place based on such factors as safety, general ambiance, and attractiveness of the collective living space.[75] The local gay and lesbian press not only focused on how the protests disrupted the daily rhythms of life in the Village, but how the filmmakers themselves had imposed on the residents, not allowing them into their own apartment buildings and restricting their use of public space without prior notification, shutting down electricity, delaying and stopping traffic, and altering the landscape. Again, the issue is of the possibility that too much publicity would destroy the semi-public status of the ghetto and, along with it, one of the major amenities that it offered many, semi-public sex.

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[73] John Davis, *Contested Ground: Collective Action and the Urban Neighborhood* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 51-53.
[74] Davis 53; Goldstein 18; Arthur Bell, "The Hollywood Hassle," *Village Voice* 3 Sept. 1979: 32.
[75] Davis 52.

Residents of a particular location also have an interest in promoting their own security, and the semi-public quality of the ghetto was believed to provide its residents a sense of protection. The publicity that Greenwich Village received during the controversy over the film could potentially undermine that security. The police raids on two of the S/M clubs that were to appear in the film, The Anvil and The Mineshaft, shortly after the departure of the filmmakers were assumed, and not without reason, to be the result of the publicity which the bars were given over the preceding weeks.[76] While the protests against *Cruising* are most often understood in relation to the struggle for "positive images" of gays and lesbians in the media, it is the particular politics of place that shaped the protests. At the practical level of everyday life, they were an attempt to assert a collective self-determination over the place in which gays and lesbians lived, worked, and socialized. At the level of the meanings ascribed to social spaces, the protests were an open challenge to the authorities that define and represent the space of the gay ghetto.

The history of gays and lesbians and the city is comprised of a number of stories that demonstrate the systematic marginalization of gays and lesbians as well as the continued resistance to such measures as limitations on gathering in public, housing choices, and other discriminatory practices, public harassment, exclusionary zoning laws, and an array of other restrictions and prohibitions which attempt to regulate gay and lesbian desires.[77] The formation of gay ghettos was, in itself, a form of spatial resistance.

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[76] Bell, "Hassle," 23.

[77] Moria Rachel Kenney, "Remember, Stonewall Was a Riot: Understanding Gay and Lesbian Experience in the City," *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History*, Leonie Sandercock, ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998), 125-128.

Gays and lesbians claimed space and formed and transformed neighborhoods. However, the strategy, as a mode of resistance, is an ambivalent one. This claiming space is implicated in the history of urban gentrification which has produced a whole series of economic and social displacements, primarily of ethnic and racial minorities. Gentrification can and does translate into political power. It also erects economic, social, and cultural borders. Within the context of gentrification and the politics of the post-liberation movement, security, amenity, and autonomy for some come at a cost for others. Lefebvre sounds a note of caution against seeing marginalized spaces as somehow entirely outside of and opposed to abstract space. Marginalized spaces are also assimilable and assimilative. They reproduce the relations of production (i.e., late capitalism) and reproduction (i.e., heteronormativity). They can also, however, be sites of difference, excess, surplus erotic and political energies, deviance and diversion. These are places where social tensions become manifest and where social divisions and dualisms are potentially eroded, thereby, continually pointing to the location of the fault lines of abstract space.

SAN FRANCISCO

The initial opposition to *Cruising* is the result of the filmmakers' choice to shoot on location in Greenwich Village, New York, thereby threatening the sense of place which the protestors in Greenwich Village had developed. However, by the late 1970s, the gay and lesbian counterpublic sphere is becoming increasingly national in its scope, encouraged, in part, by the consolidation of the "New Right" and the burgeoning gay and lesbian presses, and evidenced in events such as the National March on Washington for

Lesbian and Gay Rights on October 14, 1979, a celebration of gay and lesbian visibility and challenge to their marginalization. Wilson has claimed that the protests against *Cruising* "are politically significant because they represent the successful mobilization of large segments of gay male ghetto community in New York City (and to a lesser extent, in a number of other North American centers)."[78] Less remarked upon than the events which took place in New York are those occurring in San Francisco not to mention Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and Houston, among other cities.[79] Local gay and lesbian newspapers there covered in extensive detail the demonstrations in New York City, often implicitly or explicitly urging their readers to take similar actions.

While gay and lesbian New Yorkers did battle with the film's producer and director, gays and lesbians in San Francisco demonstrated against Transamerica, the parent company of the film's distributor United Artists, whose headquarters were located in downtown San Francisco, attempting to prevent the distribution of the film once it was completed. The "Stop the Movie *Cruising*" Committee (SMC) organized demonstrations there, gained the endorsement of a number of other local groups, and attempted to launch similar efforts in other cities such as Sacramento and Seattle. By this time, stopping *Cruising* had become a national cause, but protestors in San Francisco were also responding to their own spatialized needs and interests. For example, in August 1979, San Francisco's *The Sentinel* reported that

> New York City's gays chanted 'Avenge Harvey Milk' and 'Dan White was a cop.' Was this a somewhat belated protest against this spring's manslaughter verdict in the Dan White trial? No, it was a night of protest

[78] Wilson, 98.
[79] Curtis Ellis, "Sizing Up *Cruising* Across the Country," *Bay Area Reporter* 13 Mar. 1980, 9.

> against the film *Cruising*, a movie about murder, murder, and more murder.[80]

Similarly, the SMC circulated a flyer which described the film as a "New Right/Dan White Horror film to kick off the 80's."[81]

SMC, formed by local activist, Konstatin Berlandt, led the opposition to *Cruising* in San Francisco.[82] The group's efforts included distributing handbills and posting flyers throughout the Castro District which stated unequivocally that the film was "dangerous." One of their handbills asks, "What is the movie *Cruising*?" It is a "genocidal attack on all lesbians and gay men, a glossy glorification of murderous homophobia."[83] Another SMC handbill states that the film poses a threat because its "message is that gay men who cruise and have casual sex are asking to be killed. Almost every character who cruises is brutally murdered, so that the film justifies and encourages violence by blaming the victim."[84] "Further dangers," according to SMC included the probability that "in a world with so few positive gay role models, the fate of gay men in this film will make coming out more traumatic" and will affect "all women and sexual minorities by validating the power of only heterosexual males."[85] Excerpts from some of the more explicit passages from the script draft which had been circulating framed these claims:

> While the victim sucks him off, Stuart brings the knife down with deliberate, venomous force, as the peepshow film depicts in extremely

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[80] "Rage in Protest," *The Sentinel* 24 Aug 1979: 1.
[81] "Whistle Stop the Movie *Cruising*." Handbill. GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Ephemera Files. "Stop the Movie Cruising" File.
[82] Shortly after the controversy surrounding *Cruising* died down, Berlandt became a writer for the *Bay Area Reporter*, authoring the weekly "Media Queen" column.
[83] "Will Cruising Open in the United States and Canada February 15, 1980?" Handbill. GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Ephemera Files. "Stop the Movie Cruising" File.
[84] "Stop the Film *Cruising*." Handbill. GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Ephemera Files. "Stop the Movie Cruising" File.
[85] "Stop the Film *Cruising*" Handbill.

> grainy close-up, a man grimacing in orgasmic response. The shadow of the knife hand going up and down appears across the 16mm screen. The victim's face is gasping frenzy. Grainy close-up of the buttocks being whipped on screen. A rush of blood explodes against the image on the screen, and the film suddenly goes dark as the reel runs out.[86]

Other groups protesting the film used a similar strategy. The Gay People's Union at Stanford University, for example, circulated "Facts About *Cruising*," which also reproduced excerpts from the script and listed what was "wrong" with the film: "*Cruising* says that gay men who seek casual sex are asking to be killed," "violence and death are key elements in gay sexuality," and "murder is the cure for homosexuality."[87]

The concerns of SMC had real sources in gay and lesbian life in San Francisco in 1980. Anti-gay violence and murder had made the news throughout the 1970s. There was a marked increase in hate crimes in San Francisco as gays and lesbians became increasingly visible throughout the 1970s. Some estimates claim that by the mid-1970s, gays constituted 10% of the murder victims in the city. These statistics, along with the highly-publicized case of "The Doodler," a serial killer who stalked and murdered gay men in San Francisco until 1976, and the assassinations of Moscone and Milk in 1979, made anti-gay violence a prominent concern for activists. The Community United Against Violence (CUAV) was formed in 1979 as a response to the increasing threat of violence.[88] It is this danger that motivated or justified the protestors' actions.

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[86] "Stop the Film *Cruising*" Handbill.
[87] "Facts About *Cruising*." Handbill. GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Ephemera Files. "Stop the Movie Cruising" File.
[88] Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996) 73-78.

SMC staged numerous demonstrations in San Francisco throughout the early months of 1980, including a February 1 demonstration outside of the Transamerica Building. The group also sponsored a panel discussion which included author John Rechy, activist Pat Califia, and film director Arthur Bressan to provide a forum for people to discuss "gay stereotypes and the media, the climate of violence against gays, the leather S&M scene, [and] censorship and First Amendment rights."[89] In order to raise funds for such activities, the organizers held a benefit and rally at The Women's Building where local poets and musicians performed and committee spokespersons addressed the audience with their concerns about the film.[90] The SMC also sold buttons displaying their slogan, "Stop the Movie *Cruising*." It pictured the title of the film as dripping with blood. Planning meetings were held weekly at the local Metropolitan Community Church, and an information and solicitation booth was set up on Castro Street. A *Bay Area Reporter* article from January shows two members of SMC standing next to a burnt replica of the Transamerica Building which had been erected next to the booth.[91]

As the nationwide release date of February 15 drew closer, these activities escalated and other groups began to weigh in on the issue of *Cruising*. Early on, SMC had earned the endorsements of the CUAV, Feminist Writers' Guild, National Task Force of Prostitution, the WAVPM, Women of Color Task Force, and The Women's Building

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[89] "Panel Debate Film Cruising," *The Sentinel*, Jan. 25, 1980: 6.
[90] According to SMC's financial statement, the group's efforts cost approximately $1,420.96, while the benefits, button sales, and donations earned them only $1,051.71. The remainder of the funds came from small loans and Berlandt's own pocket. "Stop *Cruising* Group Rough Financial Statement 19 February 1980." GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Ephemera Files. "Stop the Movie Cruising" File.
[91] Priscilla Alexander, "Nix on *Cruising*," *Bay Area Reporter* Jan. 3, 1980: 11.

of the Bay Area.[92] This suggests that while it was primarily gay men in San Francisco who led the protests, a broad-based coalition was formed to back their efforts. In late January, The Harvey Milk Democratic Forum voted to join forces with SMC and the other groups protesting.[93] While the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club voted to support a boycott against the film and all Transamerican subsidiaries, the resolution they passed stated that they would not actively participate in the protests because they "opposed censorship of artistic expression and are concerned that violent protest may be censorship in disguise."[94] After the film's release, CUAV's co-chairs claimed that the film actively contributed to a "social environment in which violence against Gay men and Lesbian women is countenanced and encouraged" and threatened legal action against those responsible for making, distributing, and exhibiting the film.[95] Berlandt, who was not affiliated with the CUAV, went on to draft a memorandum in support of the prosecution of those involved with the film for knowingly inciting violence against gays and lesbians, although it was never filed in court.[96] Such legal actions against film producers were not unprecedented. Earlier that same year in the South Bronx in New York, residents filed a lawsuit against the producers of the as then unreleased *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981)

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[92] "Stop the Film *Cruising*" Handbill.
[93] "*Cruising* Controversy Heats Up," *Bay Area Reporter*, Jan. 31, 1980: 2.
[94] Qtd. in "'Alice' Meets and Acts," *Bay Area Reporter*, Feb. 14, 1980: 2.
[95] J. Andrew Nicholas and Jackie Hamilton, "Open Letter to the Perpetrators of *Cruising*," *Bay Area Reporter*, Feb. 28, 1980: 2.
[96] "Memorandum Of Points & Authorities In Support Of The Prosecution Of The Producers, Distributors And Theaters Showing The Film 'Cruising,' For Conspiracy To Murder Gays, For Solicitation Of The Murder Of Gays, And For Inciting Violence Against Gays, In Violation Of The California Penal Code." GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Ephemera Files. "Stop the Movie *Cruising*" File.

for, among other things, encouraging "police violence and judicial inequality toward the plaintiffs and the classes they represent."[97]

The local gay and lesbian press covered in extensive detail the events in San Francisco in the final weeks before the film's release. As Rodger Streitmatter points out, the gay and lesbian presses were crucial to the development of gay and lesbian politics.[98] Both Bob Ross, publisher of *Bay Area Reporter*, which began publication in 1970, and Charles Lee Morris, publisher of *The Sentinel*, which first appeared in 1974, were considered political leaders. Morris in particular had established a good relationship with city officials after the "White Night" riots in 1979.[99] *Bay Area Reporter* officially joined the efforts to "stop" *Cruising* in January when editor Paul Lorch wrote, "The *B.A.R.* endorses any effort to prevent the film from opening and encourages Gay activists—should it show—to cause its promoters as much trouble as they can while its here."[100] Ross followed this up with the claim that "this film ENCOURAGES violence. It is a threat to public safety and as such it should not be screened."[101] *Bay Area Reporter* writers were not only openly opposed to the film in print, Priscilla Alexander, Wayne Friday, and Pablo Delgado joined the protests in the streets. *Bay Area Reporter* proudly published a photograph of Alexander on the front page of the February 14 edition at the Transamerica Building demonstration. While SMC gained the endorsement of *Bay Area*

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[97] Michelle Citron, et al., The Audience Strikes Back," *Jump Cut 22* (Summer 1980): 22.
[98] Rodger Streitmatter, *The Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995): 225.
[99] Streitmatter, 226.
[100] Paul Lorch, "*Cruising*—What To Do?," *Bay Area Reporter*, Jan. 25, 1980: 8.
[101] Bob Ross, "Viewpoint," *Bay Area Reporter*, Feb. 14, 1980: 6.

Reporter early on, Morris and *The Sentinel* denounced the efforts of SMC after the opening night pickets. Morris wrote:

> The rhetoric of the Stop the Movie *Cruising* Committee aside, some of their members were determined to close this film by any means possible. The question is just how much longer are we going to allow small bands of people like this to literally dictate what will be seen by many as the actions of the whole gay community.[102]

Morris was concerned with both the growing "militancy" of gays and lesbians in San Francisco and the possibility of violence over *Cruising*. Morris appeared on a local radio show with city supervisor Carol Ruth prior to the film's release in San Francisco and urged people not to attend the demonstrations that were being planned for the film's opening night.

Several days after *Cruising* opened in New York, a pre-screening, arranged by Transamerica and Mayor Diane Feinstein's office, was held for forty gay men and lesbians in San Francisco. Seeing the film, for many, was only a confirmation of what they had feared. Those who were "shocked" and "revolted" by the film met that evening and reached the consensus that the film had no "redeeming social or artistic value" and Transamerica should withdraw the film as a "public service."[103] A number of those invited to the screening met with Feinstein and city supervisor Harvey Britt—both of whom publicly supported the protests—in order to devise a plan for diffusing the "potentially explosive" impact.[104] Feinstein requested that United Artists voluntarily withdraw the film from San Francisco theaters. The very contrary response of city officials in New York and San Francisco says something about the differing relationship

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[102] Charles Lee Morris, "Outlook," *The Sentinel*, Feb. 22, 1980: 6.
[103] Paul Lorch, "Gay Leaders Revolted at Prescreening," *Bay Area Reporter*, Feb. 14, 1980: 2.

between local gay groups and civic leaders. While Feinstein was not terribly popular with all gays in San Francisco, she, and city supervisor Britt, frequently met with gay leaders in the city to address and discuss their concerns. This mutual cooperation, while still not an easy relationship, dates back the 1975 election of George Moscone, the establishment of the gay and lesbian advisory board to the city's Human Rights Commission, and the 1977 appointment of Milk.

In the meantime, *Cruising*'s local exhibitors began to oppose the film. Originally scheduled to open at the Ghiradelli Cinema, the film was rebooked into several other local theaters, including the St. Francis, only minutes from the Castro when General Cinema refused to exhibit the film due to "its controversial nature."[105] General Cinema executive, Larry Lapidus, explained that company policy was to "refuse to play X-rated pictures or pictures which in our judgment should be X-rated. . . . We believe that the movie should have received an X-rating."[106] Prior to General Cinema's decision to pull the film, "Stop KKKruising" and "Stop Killer Movie" were spray-painted on the outside walls of Ghiradelli Theater. The action demonstrated, for at least one *Bay Area Reporter* reader, "the strong convictions of a courageous band of San Francisco homosexuals acting in concert with their fellows in New York, to stop a monstrous and evil how-to-kill-a-Gay movie."[107]

Tensions were clearly beginning to mount. The concern was that *Cruising* had the ability to generate the same sort of violent protest that erupted after the Dan White

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[104] Ron Baker, "*Cruising* Storm Blows Over," *The Sentinel*, Feb. 22, 1980: 1.
[105] Lorch, "Gay Leaders," 2.
[106] Qtd. in Baker, 1.
[107] Greg Powers, Letter, "Coating the Ghiradelli," *Bay Area Reporter*, Feb. 14, 1980: 6.

murder trial. The until-now peaceful protests brought with them the possibility of riots *The Sentinel* cautioned, using the violence that erupted over *Cruising* in New York as an example.[108] While *Bay Area Reporter* assured its readers that SMC would not "encourage or condone violence," the protest organizers were arranging for the presence of emergency medical teams at the St. Francis picket lines.[109] The SMC also distributed information about what to do if picketers were arrested, anticipating clashes with the police.[110] The threat of violence came from numerous directions: "enraged gays" who might venture in to see the film and those outside urging potential ticket buyers to boycott the film, "straight punks" who might lash out at the protestors, and the "vengeful" police still "outraged over the White Night riots" during which several were injured.[111] The numerous efforts to keep the SMC and others from picketing the St. Francis failed, but the opening night of the film turned out to be a peaceful demonstration. The numbers in attendance, between 250 and 500 people, disappointed the demonstration organizers. Reporter Ron Baker described the events of the evening:

> On two occasions small groups of young punks plowed through the picket lines, pushing protestors and attempting to provoke them into fistfights. One demonstrator tried to kick in the glass display case outside the theater. Monitors later disarmed him of a brick he was carrying inside a plastic bag. At one point monitors locked arms to prevent angry protestors from physically accosting people in line to buy tickets for the 10 PM feature. The crowd appeared ready to surge into the theater.[112]

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[108] Baker, 1.
[109] "*Cruising* Controversy Heats Up," 2
[110] "If You Get Busted," Handbill, GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Ephemera Files. "Stop the Movie *Cruising*" File.
[111] Baker, 1.
[112] Baker, 1.

Most seemed to agree that the turn out for the protests was surprisingly low. *The Sentinel* blamed the inclimate weather while some SMC members blamed Morris and the "tirades" published in *The Sentinel.*[113]

The response to *Cruising* continued to be an issue in San Francisco's alternative press for weeks after the demonstrations. There was no consensus regarding the local impact of the SMC and the events of the preceding months. A number of letters to the editors of *The Sentinel* and *Bay Area Reporter* expressed a certain hostility toward the SMC, and, in the meantime, individuals in the Castro responded to their propaganda campaign by destroying posters and flyers.[114] Some accused the protestors of attempting to marginalize the leather scene, and while the tension between activists and leather men in San Francisco seems less pronounced than in the case of New York, it certainly existed.[115] While they were heavily criticized by some, others offered the SMC their encouragement, support, and gratitude, while often admitting that the protests and the publicity they generated for the film turned into somewhat of a fiasco.[116] While most commentaries admit that the protests against the film managed to raise significant questions, they also drew attention to the fact that the controversy had been orchestrated

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[113] Delgado, 6.

[114] See, for example, Don Heimforth, "Long But Lovable," Letter, *Bay Area Reporter* 13 Mar. 1980, 7; F. Valentine Hooven, "An Open Letter," *Bay Area Reporter* 28 Feb. 1980, 7; Andrew Bentacourt, "Critiquing Critics," *Bay Area Reporter* 28 Feb. 1980, 7; Konstatin Berlandt, "An Open Letter to the *Cruising* Leaflet Attackers," *Bay Area Reporter* 14 Feb. 1980, 7; Randy Alfred and Thomas Edwards, "Viewpoint: Speech Is Free But Movies Cost Four Dollars," *The Sentinel* 22 Feb. 1980, 8; .

[115] On the history of the leather scene in San Francisco, see, Gayle Rubin, "The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather 1962-1997," *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters, eds. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998) 247-272 and, to a lesser degree, Gayle Rubin, "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole," *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, and Practice*, Mark Thompson, ed., 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2001) 199-141.

[116] See, for example, Dick Stingo, Letter, "Another Reaction to *Cruising*, *Bay Area Reporter* 28 Feb 1980, 7; Paul Lorch, "Standing Up or Standing By?," *Bay Area Reporter* 12 Mar. 1980, 6; Pablo Delgado, "An Angry Organizer," *Bay Area Reporter* 12 Mar 1980, 6.

by the film's producers to help ensure its box office success. Indeed, *Cruising* had the top box office draw its opening week, grossing $1.6 million in its first seven days before dropping to the number-five position the following week according to *Variety*. After six

weeks in release the film grossed only $4.8 million. Most reviews in the local press were highly critical of *Cruising*, citing numerous issues including the film's gratuitous and graphic violence, its superficiality, its unconvincing conclusion, and its technical and artistic "flaws."[117]

In many ways, *Cruising* is an example of the text coming to the audience as "already read." The gay male responses that are available today are somewhat predictable given the debates that raged prior to the film's release and the split responses it elicited at the time. Some continued to renounce the film as homophobic exploitation and some continued to defend the film for its "realistic," even erotic, portrayal of the leather scene. *Cruising* has remained one of the most reviled films among many gay men but has also gained a cult following and is sometimes shown during gay film revivals.[118] Indeed, from the beginning, speculation was that the makers of *Cruising* would niche market the film to gays by adding X-rated scenes cut from the original release and unsubstantiated claims that between one-third and one-half of the audience for the film in 1980 was comprised of gay men.[119]

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[117] See, for example, Wayne Friday, "*Cruising*," *Bay Area Reporter* 14 Feb 1980, 17; Michael Lasky, "*Cruising*: Bomb or Time Bomb?," *Bay Area Reporter* 28 Feb. 1980, 18; Aaron Walden, "*Cruising*," *The Sentinel* 22 Feb. 1980, 9

[118] See, for example, "Basic Impediment," *Bay Area Reporter* 11 May 1995, 1+.

[119] Ellis, 9.

Chapter Three: "The Whole Queer Scene": *Cruising*, Geography, and Urban Sexuality

APPROPRIATING SPACE

What was at stake in the crisis initiated by the production, exhibition, and reception of *Cruising* was the tenuous stability of ghetto life, the meaning of the ghetto itself, the sexual practices and identities rooted there, and the relationship between the gay ghetto and the nation. Gay and lesbian activists sought to defend the "bundle of interests" which emerged from and helped shape life in the gay ghetto and attempted to challenge the heteronormative spatial practices that worked to marginalize them.[1] The protests represent a coupling of sexual identity and class politics. That is, the protests need to be understood in relation to the history of gays, urban planning, and gentrification and as an expression of a sense of entitlement rooted in middle-class values. Because of the paradoxical dissolution of the unified "gay community" described by Kath Weston, however, the interests of the activists soon came in conflict with the interests of other gays and lesbians, who, it would seem, were most interested in the erotic possibilities of space whether or not those possibilities ran counter to what the "mainstream" considered proper sexual conduct. What the protests against *Cruising* did is mobilize the contradictory array of experience, knowledge, needs, interests, and desires of gay and lesbian urban life. The gay ghetto can be understood as a "third space" from which the

[1] John Davis, *Contested Ground: Collective Action and the Urban Neighborhood* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 72-73.

challenge of difference emerges and threatens the homogeneity of abstract space. The protests against the film can be seen as both instrumental in the struggle against the homogenizing tendency of abstract space and the marginalization of gays, lesbians, and queers and complicit with it. The complicity I am suggesting stems from the failure to interrogate the ways in which hetero- and homo-sexualities are *both* products of heteronormativity and the ways in which gay space produces its own political, erotic, and economic borders and margins.

Cruising is "about" sexuality and it is also "about" social space**.** Better still, *Cruising* spatializes sexuality. The film's depiction of urban space and sexuality is stark and vivid. Andrew Sarris describes the *mise-en-scène* in this way:

> New York's gay milieu, and for that matter, New York itself, has never seemed so vile, sordid, dispiriting, and degrading. One can almost smell the piss in the doorways, the massive body odors on the steamy city streets. One can feel also the boiling feelings of loneliness, failure, mediocrity, disgust, and raging self-hatred.[2]

That the psychic turmoil of the "outcasts" that populate the film should be mirrored in the abject environment is not really surprising. At least since the advent of German Expressionism and, later, the urban crime film in the U.S. in the era of early sound film, cinematic settings, urban or otherwise, have been seen as an extensions of the characters' troubled states of mind.

Theorists of urban geography have also attempted to make links between subjects and their lived environment that are more than metaphorical. Steve Pile, for example, concludes that:

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[2] Andrew Sarris, "*Cruising* Into Confusion," *The Village Voice*, 18 Feb. 1980, 47.

> topographies of mind, body, and city, while not being reducible to one another, are mapped through citation of one another; just as topographies of subjectivity, meaning and power—such as class, gender, race, sexuality, and so on—are mapped through resonance and dissonance with one another.[3]

Urban geography has taken up this issue of the mutually constitutive role of cities and subjects in relation to gay men. In "Sexuality and the Spatial Dynamics of Capitalism," Lawrence Knopp discusses how, under late capitalism, "place" has become increasingly unstable. This destabilization "leads to a greater concern about the *meanings* of places on the part both of inhabitants and of outsiders." [4] Late capitalism has become more sensitive to the specificity of places, in order to commodify them. At the same time that capitalism produces and commodifies social differences, these "spatially constructed 'othernesses,' in the form of place-based identities, become part of the material basis of social and political struggles, some of which may turn out to be counter-hegemonic."[5] "Struggles over the sexual codings of space and sexual symbols in space," for Knopp, "also become material constituents in the structuration of space."[6] Following Knopp, it is my contention that the symbolic construction of space plays an active role in the production of both material places and subjects, and that the protests against *Cruising* had to do with asserting the "right" to inhabit social space and recast its meanings. That is, the demonstrations were not simply about demanding "positive" media images. Rather, the protests against *Cruising* were deeply implicated in a material

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[3] Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 181.
[4] Lawrence Knopp, "Sexuality and the Spatial Dynamics of Capitalism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 10* (1992): 652-653.
[5] Knopp, "Sexuality and the Spatial Dynamics," 661.
[6] Knopp, "Sexuality and the Spatial Dynamics," 664.

politics of urban places and sexual identities that sought to territorialize the counterspace of the gay urban ghetto.

The protests against *Cruising* were primarily an assertion of the "right" to occupy and control the spaces inhabited by urban gays and lesbians. Henri Lefebvre argues that when marginalized groups appropriate space for their own aims, they potentially hinder the homogenizing aims of "abstract" public space, make room for difference, and undermine the social relations which public space enforces. "Abstract space" should be understood, following Lefebvre, as "space that is fetishized, that reduces possibilities, and cloaks conflicts and differences in illusory coherence and transparency."[7] Abstract space is produced when economic and political space "converge toward the elimination of all differences."[8] This "spatial economy" works to produce consensus about the "commonality of use" of space and enforce normative meanings and appropriate uses of space. It "valorizes certain relationships between people in particular places (shops, cafes, cinemas, etc.)," making only some subjects the "beneficiaries of space."[9] Abstract space strives for homogeneity. This homogenization is achieved through a "process of fragmentation and marginalization that elides difference and attempts to prevent conflict."[10] Differences persist, however, and threaten to disrupt the operation of abstract space, partly at least, because of the circulation of desire, which, according to Lefebvre, "prevents stagnation and cannot help but produce differences."[11]

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[7] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 393
[8] Lefebvre, 293.
[9] Lefebvre, 56.
[10] Eugene J. McCann, "Race, Protest, and Public Space: Contextualizing Lefebvre in the U.S. City," *Antipode* 31.2 (1999), 171.
[11] Lefebvre, 395.

The protests are historically important for a number of interrelated reasons. First, they signal the possibilities and limitations of gay and lesbian identity as idealized by the gay liberation movement of the preceding years. At the same time that large segments of the gay and lesbian populations participated in or supported the activism surrounding the film, there was also a great deal of dissention. Among other things, gays and lesbians disagreed, for example, about how the film should be interpreted and the dangers of appearing to advocate censorship. Descriptions of the protests range from "a progressive and militant strategy for confronting bigotry" to "hysterical, censorious gay activism."[12] The gay and lesbian opposition to the protests discussed in the previous chapter foregrounds the ways in which the protests might signal the limits of gay and lesbian collectivity. While Charles Lyons is correct that gay and lesbian groups did set out to challenge heterosexual authority to define homosexuality, those who did so often found their own "authority" challenged by other gays, lesbians, and queers. In fact, the protests against *Cruising* initiated a series of conflicts that paralleled the rifts formed in gay and lesbian cultures over issues of gender, sexuality, and politics.[13] These conflicts as well as the racialized and economic power that were exercised in gay and lesbian geographies led to what Weston calls the "paradox of the disruption of gay identity" which "broke apart the unitary gay subject, and with it the spatial metaphor of a community capable of

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[12] Alexander Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*, Ghetto Politics, Gay Sexuality," *Social Text 4* (1981), 95; Paul Burston, "Confessions of a Gay Film Critic, or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love *Cruising*," *Anti-Gay*. Mark Simpson, ed. (New York: Freedom Editions, 1996), 103.

[13] Similar points are made in Wilson. However, the argument presented here is distinct in at least two ways. First, I explore how social and cultural geography can help account for the why the protests occurred. Wilson forgoes this type of "causal analysis." Second, Wilson's is a local study and does not attempt to explain, and even downplays, the importance of protests against *Cruising* in other cities. This argument attempts to connect local actions taken in different cities by thinking about them in relation to a growing sense of gay nationalism.

inclusion or exclusion."[14] Weston makes the point that the gay and lesbian liberation movement and the "Great Gay Migration" to gay ghettos in the U.S. had given rise to a sense of gay identity that proved throughout the 1970s to be "exceedingly limited" given the "extraordinarily varied constituency" it claimed to represent, and that this "generic gay subject" lost out to a more "specialized identity politics" that emerged from the challenges posed by those who felt marginalized by the "imagined gay community."[15] It is, in part, this shift to a "specialized identity politics" that we can begin to trace by looking at the protests against Cruising.

THE SEXUAL "FRINGE" AND CODES OF HYPERMASCULINITY

For gays and lesbians in New York and San Francisco, Greenwich Village and the Castro District were important places of relative autonomy, amenity, and security and places in which sexual practices and identities were explored, negotiated, and made meaningful. During the 1970s, the flurry of political activity in the wake of the Stonewall riots of 1969 began to subside. At the same time, however, conflicts over sexual ethics and gender norms were ongoing. S/M and gay hypermasculinity in particular were points of contention. *Cruising*'s appropriation of some of the more divisive issues of gay life and sexuality and the possibility of its instrumental role in exploiting and pathologizing gays and lesbians were great concerns.

The emphasis in gay and lesbian politics on personal pride and visibility impacted the leather and S/M scene as well. The coming out of leather and S/M scenes brought

[14] Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," GLQ 2.3 (1995), 274
[15] Weston, 270.

with it the possibility of increased social and sexual repression, which the New York bar raids of 1979 demonstrated. Arnie Karnowitz wrote after the release of *Cruising*, "you can find me at The Mineshaft, before the glare of too much publicity destroys its fragile mystique."[16]

The Mineshaft was located along the Hudson River near to both the West Village and Chelsea in the meatpacking district of the Lower West Side of Manhattan, an area called "The Badlands," and was one of the, if not *the*, most well-known gay male sex clubs in the U.S. in the late 1970s, frequented primarily by leather men who engaged in sexual activities that ranged from "vanilla sex," to bondage, to fisting. Joel Brodsky's ethnography of the Mineshaft, drawn from observations made between 1979 and 1982, the period considered to be the club's heyday, sketches the economic, social, and cultural functions of the club, suggesting that it served as a place where gay men engaged in liminal rituals of socio-sexual initiation. Most significantly, the Mineshaft was a site where the unarticulated and neglected desires of gay men could be explored in a communal setting that encouraged the abandonment of inhibitions, provided a sense of social integration, and allowed for the reduction of physical and psychological risks to the participants.[17]

"The Badlands" was a non-residential area of Manhattan and was typically empty at night. This environment proved to be quite suitable for the after hours bars that began to proliferate in New York in the early 1970s. These bars drew patrons in when

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[16] Arnie Karnowitz, "What Has *Cruising* Cost the Gay Community?," *The Advocate* 17 Apr 1980, 19.
[17] Joel I. Brodsky, "The Mineshaft: A Retrospective Ethnography," *The Journal of Homosexuality* 24.3-4 (1993), 248-249.

nightclubs and discos closed and were most active between 2:00 and 5:00 AM. While each club catered to a different crowd, for most of those who went to any sex club, the main attraction was the promise of anonymous sex. Most after hours bars had backrooms, dimly lit spaces where patrons could retreat to engage in sexual activity.

Brodsky writes that "the Mineshaft could be approached with some sense of abandon, reverence, anxious dread (typically the first time), but usually with some sense of excitement."[18] Upon entering, patrons could drink and socialize and initiate sexual encounters, building an "erotic momentum" that would propel them into the backrooms.

The backroom area, the "playground," was the center of sexual activity at the Mineshaft. The area upstairs was dimly lit and warmer than the front room, was filled with wooden stalls with "glory holes" in the walls for privacy and anonymous oral sex, slings for fisting, and a spot lit wood frame that held an additional sling. The rules were clear: no talking, laughing, or "dishing." The downstairs was a continuation of the playground, and could only be accessed from the backroom upstairs. The lower-level was maze-like, sectioned off by a series of black walls, with pitch-black corners. Different sections were designed for different activities. There were areas with more stalls, and slings, and, additionally, one section of the lower-level had a number of bathtubs for guests who wanted to engage in water sports.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Mineshaft for Brodsky was its ability to cater to so many men with so many different desires and fantasies and accommodate them all somehow. A complex "etiquette of glances, gestures, movements, and

[18] Brodsky, 242.

whispered encouragements" negotiated the tension that could arise.[19] This set of signals passed from one patron to the next helped attract those who were willing to fulfill one's sexual desires and stave off unwanted attention, preventing the hostility it might provoke. Brodsky points out that "actual rage or violence . . . [was] an exception which revealed the rule of ritualized social control."[20] The key to understanding the Mineshaft, and by extension, gay male S/M is in its "playfulness" not its ostensible aggressiveness. Brodsky's discussion of S/M and the Mineshaft consistently draws on the ideas of liminality and play. The entrance to the club is the threshold to a liminal experience where sexual mores and gender norms can be turned upside down, where participants can "play the world backwards."[21] For Brodsky, S/M is first and foremost "theater" and is "concerned with some of the more profound sociocultural contradictions in American culture."[22] S/M and the Mineshaft also embody, for Brodsky, a new gay American male hypermasculine "style" which challenged "the stereotypical equation of open gay identity and gender reversal" while "systematically [violating] taboos against a wide range of sexual behaviors."[23]

While Scottie Ferguson of *The Advocate* seems to regret the "political response" to *Cruising*, he couches his own reasons for going to the film in political terms: "I chose to violate the boycott and see the movie . . . because I knew whatever Friedkin presented on the screen would become America's reference point for gay sadomasochistic

[19] Brodsky, 247.
[20] Brodsky, 247.
[21] Brodsky, 236.
[22] Brodsky, 235.
[23] Brodsky, 237.

promiscuity."[24] Indeed, *Time*'s "The Gay World's Leather Fringe," featuring a publicity still from *Cruising* of Pacino dancing in The Cockpit surrounded by leather men, asks the question, "do homosexual males consciously seek danger," and looks to the film for answers:

> Though they admit that activities at the bars are remarkably exotic, gays insist that the possibility of bringing home a dangerous sex partner is remote. Despite these disclaimers, homosexual homicides are frequent--and often gruesome: dismembered corpses (as in *Cruising*'s first killing) and mutilated genitals are common.[25]

Much of the debate around *Cruising* centered on the film's depiction of the sexual fringe and the spaces their activity codes. As discussed, the belief was that the demonstrations were an attempt to keep the more "radical" aspects of gay sexuality hidden from public view because they were at odds with dominant sexual norms and threatened activists' attempts at social and political legitimacy. Certainly "the nervous urge to deny the kinky corners of gay sexuality" existed in the protests against *Cruising* as well as the desire to protect the subcultural status of S/M.[26] At the same time, however, there was also the suspicion that both S/M and gay hypermasculinity represented a capitulation to heteronormative culture. Richard Goldstein, for one, linked S/M to a "new conservatism."[27]

In part, what made S/M and the hypermasculinity of leather culture so contested was, in Edward Guthman's words, that it was "gravely misunderstood" and was also "the

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[24] Scottie Ferguson, "A Different Critical View," *The Advocate* 16 Apr 1980: 18.
[25] "The Gay World's Leather Fringe," *Time*, 24 Mar 1980: 74
[26] Edward Guthman, "The *Cruising* Controversy: William Friedkin vs. the Gay Community" *Cineaste* (Summer 1980), 5.
[27] Richard Goldstein, "Why the Village Went Wild," *Village Voice* 5 Aug 1979, 16.

most convenient tool available to anti-gay hysterics."[28] Because, until the early 1980s, most research on S/M had been done with psychiatric patients and had concentrated almost entirely on gay male S/M, it emerged as a distinctly gay male pathology.[29] Moreover, much of this research studied S/M outside of its social context, thereby neglecting the ways in which S/M interactions were not simply "violent acts" but "theatrical and carefully controlled performance[s]."[30] The author of "The Gay World's Leather Fringe," for example, citing "pro-gay" researcher, C. A. Tripp, and the American Psychiatric Association, claims that heterosexual S/M is rare and lesbian S/M "virtually non-existent," while gay male S/M common because "there is no shortage of players and leather bars make them easy to locate."[31] Gay male S/M, according to the author, is dangerous because it involves two men, and men's desires are inherently aggressive. The image of the leather man provokes anxiety in this context because it represents male desire outside of the constraints of a "domesticating" female counterforce, allowing it to go unchecked and, ultimately, become deadly. Pat Califia's now widely-read essay, "The Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality," published in 1980, did much to counter many of the misconceptions about S/M and its practitioners, but rather than attempt to "normalize" S/M, the essay flaunts the disruptive potential of S/M. For Califia, sadomasochists select the most frightening, disgusting, or unacceptable activities and transmute them into pleasure. "We make use of all of the forbidden symbols and all the disowned emotions.

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[28] Guthman, 5.
[29] Thomas Weinberg, "Sadomasochism in the United States: A Review of Recent Sociological Literature," *The Journal of Sex Research* 23.1 (Feb. 1987) 57.
[30] Weinberg, 52.
[31] "The Gay World's," 74-75.

S/M is a deliberate, premeditated, emotional blasphemy. It is a form of extremism and sexual dissent."[32] Moreover, S/M, for Califia, has the ability to disorganize preconceived notions of gender, race, and class and the ways in which they inscribe power, while it parodies and challenges authority.

Similarly to the ways in which S/M confuses social categories of sex and gender, gay hypermasculinity has a disruptive potential because it undercuts the heteronormative association of effeminacy with gay men and masculinity with heterosexual men. For Martin Levine, "gay men enacted a hypermasculine sexuality as a way to challenge their stigmatization as failed men."[33] Gay hypermasculinity, however, was not simply the assumption of a predefined masculinity, but the active creation of a macho gayness not unlike drag. In fact, Levine suggests the late 1970s is a period of transition from "Mother Camp" to "Father Camp," or a transition for female drag to male drag, both caricatures of the gender they ostensibly present. While the masculine style of clones and leather men was specifically gay in its connotations, it also suggested a certain "overconformity" to masculine norms. It was a masculinity more masculine than that of most heterosexual males. Steven Dasaro, a *Cruising* extra, for example, bragged in an interview with *Mandate* that "macho straight men have a long way to go to be as much of a man as I am."[34] A performative excess in gay hypermasculinity's fashioning of "objectionably

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[32] Pat Califia, "The Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality," *The Advocate* 27 Dec. 1980: 19.
[33] Martin Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, Michael S. Kimmel, ed. (New York: New York UP, 1998), 5. For other analyses of "gay macho," see: Jamie Gough, "Theories of Sexual Identity and the Masculinization of Gay Men," in *Coming on Strong: Gay Politics and Culture*, Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallace, eds. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 119-136; R.W. Connell, "A Very Straight Gay: Masculinity, Homosexual Experience, and the Dynamics of Gender," *American Sociological Review 57* (Dec. 1992): 735-751.
[34] John Devere, "The Men of *Cruising*," *Mandate* Feb 1980: 14.

stereotypical masculine tropes" both threatens to denaturalize gender and undermine the "heterosexual and misogynist associations they denote."[35] Thus, both S/M and gay hypermasculinity can, at times, potentially disrupt established norms, bringing us to the edge of an open, ambivalent, contradictory "third space." By further undermining the distinctions between public/private and pain/pleasure, leather culture proved troublesome for a gay and lesbian political culture which emphasized a desexualized "respectability." To the degree that post-liberation gay and lesbian politics of the 1970s depended on the distinction between hetero- and homosexual, leather men were difficult to accept. These tensions underlie the uneasy relationship between the gay and lesbian activists protesting *Cruising* and the leather men who came to the film's defense.

Implicit in gay hypermasculinity was a rejection of gay identity as it had been previously embodied. For example, the cover of a 1980 issue of *The Advocate* features a photograph of men in all sorts of macho costume (the same costumes sported by The Village People) collectively asserting "Gay!? Who's Gay!?" The distance leather men felt and created between themselves and "sissy fluffs" and the rigidly and defined gender norms and codes of sexual conduct accepted by a number of gay activists fractured gay collectivity, as the solitary and unified community strained under the increasing diversification of gay ghetto culture. Steven Dasaro's interview contrasts the recent New York pride march and the set of *Cruising*, the former being a parade of "queens" and the latter a film set full of "*men.*"[36] Gene Ford states in his interview with *Mandate* that "the image of gays this movie depicts [is] better than suggesting that all homosexuals are

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[35] Richard Mohr, *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 165.
[36] Devere, "Men," 14.

nellie faggots."[37] Califia writes, "I identify more strongly as a sadomasochist than as a lesbian."[38] Similarly, as Levine shows, leather men often identified more strongly with butch men than with gays. Goldstein wrote that the extras hanging around of the set of *Cruising* look "authentic" but "passé," contrasting the key chains and "hot hankies" of the extras with the political buttons and pink triangles worn by the demonstrators.[39] All of this is to suggest that the transition from Mother Camp to Father Camp discussed by Levine was intensely contested. The increasing visibility of S/M and the proliferation of gender identities throughout the 1970s tested the limits of gay collectivity, and these struggles over sexual, gender, and political identifications played themselves out in the demonstrations against *Cruising*.

Eugene McCann, building on the work of Lefebvre, has written about the ways in which urban protest produces and contests spatialized social inequalities and injustices. In his study of urban unrest in Lexington, Kentucky, McCann writes,

> The production of public space can be seen . . . as a continual struggle between the state and capital trying to produce and maintain a seemingly homogeneous but fundamentally contradictory abstract space, on the one hand, and subaltern groups. . .asserting their "counter-spaces" and constructing their "counter-publics," on the other.[40]

While abstract space can appear homogeneous, it is, beneath the manifest coherence and cohesion, fundamentally contradictory, producing and aggravating social and spatial conflicts and differences which "endure or arise on the margins of the

[37] Devere, "Men," 12.
[38] Califia, 19.
[39] Goldstein, 16-18.
[40] McCann, 180.

homogenized realm."[41] When groups on these margins, "the edges of the city, the shanty towns, the spaces of forbidden games, of guerrilla war," threaten to divert "homogenized space to their own purposes, a theatrical or dramatized space is likely to arise," and common assumptions about space and the social relations it enables can be potentially undermined.[42] Others have identified these spaces of social difference, following Lefebvre, as "third space."[43] In "Masculinism, the Use of Dualistic Epistemologies and Third Spaces," Steve Pile outlines an epistemological project that recognizes the ways in which binaries organize thought and that is also capable of interrogating and refusing them. Pile notes the difficulties in employing dualistic categories analytically.[44] Among other things, the reliance on dualisms tends to make invisible other categories. One of the fundamental dualisms in western culture, male/female, for example, has rendered invisible other transgendered and intergendered positions, while the heterosexual/homosexual opposition has elided and denied the possibility of bisexual and other queer sexualities. Moreover, when scholars employ binaries in their analyses, they may also, however unwittingly, transcode the values inherent in other hierarchically constituted dualisms, aligning, for example, time/male/reason/mind and positioning them in opposition to space/female/unreason/body, valuing the former set of terms and devaluing the latter. This has the effect of delimiting what constitutes and who possesses knowledge and what and who does not. Fantasy and affect in a culture that values most

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[41] Lefebvre, 373.
[42] Lefebvre, 373, 391.
[43] Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, J. Rutherford, ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207-221.
[44] Steve Pile, "Masculinism, the Use of Dualistic Epistemologies and Third Spaces," *Anitpode* 26.3 (1994): 272-273.

highly time/male/reason/mind, for example, to the degree that they are deemed "unreasonablilites," do not constitute knowledge. Also, the use of dualistic epistemologies "denies, deflects and/or disguises the differences within binary oppositions."[45] That is, each of the opposed categories that constitute a dualism is already fractured, fragmented, complex, and fluid. Yet, dualisms work to conceal the differences within a categorical construct, positing it to be homogeneous. In contrast to this dualistic epistemology, Pile proposes one that employs the notion of a "third space." Pile suggests that third space is both a geographical place "structured by intersecting geometries of power, identity and meaning" and a politics that avoids "polarity and enables the construction of new radical alliances."[46] Such an epistemology potentially makes it possible

> first, to position socially constructed dualisms within their grounds of dissimilarity; second, to trace the effects of the transcoding of value between power-ridden dualisms; and finally to think about the ways in which the fabric of this third space is continually fragmented, fractured, incomplete, uncertain, and the site for struggles for meaning and representation.[47]

Lisa Law approaches the study of sex tourism in the Philippines from the location of third space in order to challenge the stereotypical notion that the encounters in the bars of Cebu City amount simply to the sexual and economic exploitation of helpless Filipona women by voyeuristic white western men, "an uncomplicated relation of domination."[48] While such representations, for Law, do point to the numerous inequalities that exist

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[45] Pile, "Masculinism," 272-273.
[46] Pile, "Masculinism," 273, 271.
[47] Pile, "Masculinism," 273.
[48] Lisa Law, "Dancing on the Bar: Sex, Money and the Uneasy Politics of Third Space," in *Geographies of Resistance.* Eds. Steve Pile and Michael Keith. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 107.

between subjects and nations, they also reinforce and fix subject positions such as oppressor and victim, colonizer and colonized, thereby leaving the women who work in the bars with little agency, little room for resistance, and no space in which to develop their own unique subjectivities where their gender, racial, and economic positions converge in complicated ways. The bars of Cebu City are, for Law, an example of third space, beyond many dualisms such as indigenous/foreign and oppressive/liberatory, where dominant stereotypes are contested, subjects speak on their own behalf and fashion forms of resistance that are subtle and ambiguous. Law argues that third space "does not contain preconstituted identities which determine experience, nor does it possess an authentic character or identity," but is, rather, "an ambivalent space of negotiation, and a site of struggle for meaning and representation" where power is "transient, flexible."[49] At the same time that is necessary to employ these terms, it is necessary to try to move beyond them, to understand how they operate and how they fail. Cities are also third spaces that embody contradictory fantasies, identifications, and shifting alliances that disrupt received and dualistic notions of sexuality, gender, and identity. How does the space of the urban ghetto function as a type of third space, a space in which heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine, public/private, and other dualisms breakdown?

McCann is right that an analysis of the racialized power operative within urban space is glaringly absent from Lefebvre's framework, yet he is also correct in asserting that Lefebvre's theory of the production of space can still prove useful for thinking about

[49] Law, 110-111.

urban identity and the role of protest in the U.S. One of Lefebvre's main contentions is that social space situates the relations of production and reproduction in their "appropriate" place and that certain representations of social space help naturalize and maintain the viability of these relations.[50] Lefebvre draws attention to the practices and codes through which space and social relations are reproduced and potentially contested. By "spatial practice," Lefebvre means the everyday routines through which a "society secretes . . . social space" and defines "each member of a given society's relationship to that space."[51] These spatial practices produce "actions and signs; the trivialized spaces of everyday life; and in opposition to these last, spaces made special by symbolic means as desirable or undesirable; benevolent or malevolent; sanctioned or forbidden to particular groups."[52] The inhabitants and users of social space, as Lefebvre calls them, are never simply passively assigned a place within the social. Rather, social space emerges in the dialectical relationship between space as it is "conceived" (representations of space), "perceived" (spatial practices), and "lived" (representational spaces). Users and inhabitants can employ spatial codes in ways that "change," "appropriate," and "overlay" physical spaces. A "spatial code" is, for Lefebvre, "not simply a way of reading or interpreting space: rather, it is a means of living in that space, of understanding it, and producing it."[53]

McCann is particularly interested in Lefebvre because of the emphasis he places on the dialectic between imagination and space, the ways in which representations

[50] Lefebvre, 32.
[51] Lefebvre, 33-38.
[52] Lefebvre, 228.
[53] Lefebvre, 47-48.

participate in the production of space, and his emphasis on everyday practices and experiences. McCann uses Lefebvre's model for exploring the role of urban protest in the production of space. For McCann, the space of the city can often be constraining, producing frustrations over the lack of opportunity for personal expression, the lack of autonomy, infringements on the quality of life, and the exclusion of marginalized populations from civic decision-making processes. These different inequalities and injustices, and the separation and isolation of individuals into a "collection of ghettos," produces a number of resistances including social unrest and violent protest, which occur because they often appear as the only means by which to secure a space from which a group can represent themselves.[54] Protest is a spatial practice that mediates between representations of space and representational space, "working within the bounds of the conceived abstract spaces of planners and architects while simultaneously being shaped by individuals' perceptions and uses of space."[55]

In addition to Lefebvre's relevance to the understanding of social protest which McCann outlines, his concern with gender and (hetero)sexual relations makes his work particularly significant in this discussion of urban sexuality and space. Virginia Blum and Heidi Nast have pointed out how Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* "recognizes the degree to which heterosexuality has historically sustained and shaped political relations."[56] The authors trace the resonances and dissonances in the work of Lefebvre and Jacques Lacan. Both Lacan and Lefebvre propose a theory of the subject, but where

[54] McCann, 181
[55] McCann, 173
[56] Virginia Blum and Heidi Nast, "Where's the Difference? The Heterosexualization of Alterity in Henri Lefebvre and Jacques Lacan," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 14* (1996), 560.

Lacan offers a universal, apolitical theory rooted in essentialist assumptions about a decorporalized subject, Lefebvre is more attuned to history, the body, and political economy. While Lacan conceptualizes the formation of the ego in terms of the mirror stage, Lefebvre situates the subject historically, in relation to the landscape. "Analogous to the Lacanian subject's visually mediated passage from the real to the mirror stage, Lefebvre's subject emerges bodily and politically from natural space to what he calls *absolute space*. For both theorists, these movements found alterity."[57]

Natural space for Lefebvre is analogous to the real in the Lacanian sense, absolute and abstract space are analogous to the imaginary and the symbolic, and it is what Lefebvre, recasting Lacan's discussion of the phallus, refers to as the "phallic formant" that disrupts the unity of absolute space and introduces abstract space, difference, and, thus, subjectivity. Blum and Nast discuss how the "evolution" of space in Lefebvre is gendered, primarily through his use of maternal and paternal metaphors. Natural space is cast as feminine and the "phallic formant" is clearly masculine: "Metaphorically, it symbolizes force, male fertility, masculine violence."[58] Such statements are worth interrogating, because, even though he tends to be highly critical of the phallus and the spaces that it organizes, he is complicit in the misogyny and heterosexism that he uncovers. Nonetheless, the authors contend that, unlike Lacan, for whom the operation of the phallus is necessary for the acquisition of language and the creation of culture, Lefebvre argues that the phallic formant which organizes space is political, the product of a socioeconomic history that can be and is contested. Lefebvre offers a way out of the

[57] Blum and Nast, 565
[58] Lefebvre, 286. Qtd. in Blum and Nash, 573.

structuralist impasse. "Just as Lefebvre posits that we always bodily and spatially exceed the surface of the mirror, so too we continually exceed the disciplining patriarchal codes of contemporary social orders."[59] If heterosexuality harnessed to capitalism is a homogenizing force, gays, lesbians, and queers have "remapped desire" and the spaces in which those sexualities are articulated. Blum and Nast point out, however, that all sexualities are excessive, unsettling the category of sexuality itself.[60]

While Lefebvre is implicitly critical of the ways in which heterosexuality has been a shaping force in social and spatial relations, and while he suggests that this role is contingent and not necessary, he does not consider other sexualities or non-heterosexual desires, how they are spatialized, or how they produce space. His approach, however, leaves this possibility open. Lefebvre is interested in eroticized spaces and the ambiguities that they engender and spaces of leisure as contradictory spaces of difference. While the gay ghettoes discussed here were (and are) more than sites of pleasure, sex, and consumption, gay neighborhoods are consistently portrayed as "centres of hedonism and self-indulgence" and "gay entertainment areas . . . as dangerous sadomasochistic underworlds."[61] For Lawrence Knopp, this is a matter of social control. Gay ghettoes become troubling areas in need of surveillance. Most spaces that suggest the failure of or represent a threat to the "dominant order" are "coded as erotic in both dominant and alternative cultures (i.e., as both dangerous and potentially liberatory)" while less troubling areas are often considered less erotic, and are often represented as

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[59] Blum and Nast, 578
[60] Blum and Nast, 578
[61] Lawrence Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis," *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*. David Bell and Gil Valentine, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 149.

desexualized spaces.[62] Sexual anxieties and fears as well as sexual desires are projected onto these urban spaces.

Lefebvre discusses social space similarly when describing the relation between what he calls the scene and the obscene, the scene being homogenous, abstract space, and the obscene being those spaces where "everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated: whatever is inadmissible, be it malefic or forbidden, thus has its own hidden space on the near or far side of the frontier."[63] Lefebvre links these marginal spaces of the obscene to desire and excess: "waste, play, struggle, art, festival—in short, Eros," noting that "excess, intoxication, risks" offer a certain sense of freedom and also have their own use values.[64] Lefebvre challenges the notion that excess is simply "wasted energy," suggesting "surplus energy" as a better term, and positing that "a productive squandering of energy is not a contradiction in terms: an expenditure of energy may be deemed 'productive' so long as some change, no matter how small, is thereby effected in the world."[65] For Lefebvre, what, since Freud, have been labeled drives (the pleasure principal, the death drive; psychopathologies, neuroses, psychoses, anxiety, narcissism; and perversions, such as sadomasochism) are expenditures of surplus energy. A body, moreover, does not expend energy arbitrarily or randomly. Rather, "it has its own specific prey, surroundings, and predators—in a word, its own *space*. It lives *in* that space, and it is a component part *of* it."[66] Thus, subjects and their desires actively

[62] Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space," 153.
[63] Lefebvre, 36.
[64] Lefebvre, 177-178
[65] Lefebvre, 178
[66] Lefebvre, 178

shape the spaces that they occupy. These spaces, moreover, like the scene and the obscene, always exist in relation to other spaces. To the degree that certain eroticized spaces become obscene sites for the expenditure of surplus energy, they highlight the vulnerability of and cracks in the scene and in abstract space.

The "breaking apart" of abstract space for Lefebvre is related to the struggle between Logos and Eros, the reality principal and the pleasure principal, an interest in the systemization, classification, and arrangement of space in service to the "established order" and an investment of affect and energy in the creative appropriation of space, and, I might add, the relations of reproduction and the expenditure of excess erotic energies which run counter to it. On the one hand, sanctioned relations of reproduction shapes the "bio-physiological relations of the sexes and between age groups, along with the specific organization of the family," and, on the other hand, "other, covert, clandestine, and repressed relations which, precisely because they are repressed, characterize transgressions related not so much to sex *per se* as to sexual pleasure, its preconditions and consequences."[67] Against the seemingly less ambiguous, homogenized, abstract space which produces differences only as commodified signs, Lefebvre looks at the productive capacities of "deviant and diverted," subordinate social spaces. These spaces, however, are somewhat paradoxical, for while they seem to exist "outside" of abstract space, they are an extension of it. They are functional and assimilative, they enable and constrain activities, and they serve the relations of production and reproduction. At the same time, however, they offer the possibility of transgression, they allow for the

[67] Lefebvre, 32-33

expression of social tensions, and they "surmount divisions," such as those between social/mental, sensory/intellectual, everyday/festival, work/play in order to become the very epitome of third space. Lefebvre writes, "This space further reveals where vulnerable areas and potential breaking points are: everyday life, the urban sphere, the body, and the differences that emerge within the body."[68]

As McCann points out, counter-publics can "take space" through the use of various spatial practices, including public protest, "through which they can represent themselves to the wider public and insert themselves in the discourses of the bourgeois public sphere."[69] There are other, perhaps less overt, means by which subjects in space mark, claim, and contest the meaning of places, strategies that highlight and solicit the erotic and the ambiguous, that surmount dualisms such as public/private, hetero/homosexual, male/female, and thus undermine the binarizations that abstract space produces and requires. The protests against *Cruising* were part of a larger struggle over the "contested ground" of urban bodies and pleasures, sexuality and politics.

"DOUBLE-EDGINESS" IN THE CITY AND THE RECEPTION OF *CRUISING*

Beyond being a place within which gays and lesbians shaped their lives and sexualities, the ghetto was also a site onto which the "emotional ambivalence" and "sexual anxieties" of outsiders were projected.[70] The space of the ghetto, like the signifiers of gay hypermasculinity and sadomasochism, is ambiguous and elicits

[68] Lefebvre, 384-385
[69] McCann, 168.
[70] Bronski, 190.

different, incompatible "mapping strategies."[71] This incompatibility is underscored when we contrast Goldstein's and the *Time* author's representations of Greenwich Village.

> The corner of Greenwich Village where *Cruising* is being shot has always been a mecca for those who have depended on the kindness of strangers. Back when Billy Friedkin was impressed with wet dreams, gay people called this stretch of the waterfront that adjoins West 14th Street "the casbah." But its bars are designed to resemble a filmmaker's fantasy of dangerous sex. Illusion—not danger—is the point. The people who go to these bars know that they are visiting the Luna Park of the libido.[72]

> One of the most popular trysting spots for New York gays in the mid-70's was a rotting corner of Greenwich Village, where homosexuals regularly risked mugging, fire, police raids, and the possibility of falling into the Hudson River. Why? One theory is that oppression by the straight world has taught many gays to connect sex with guilt, shame, and danger. . . . Edward Gregerson of Queens (N.Y.) College, who studies sexual mores [claims]: "If you make your first sexual contact in a public toilet or in the back of a truck where the guy next to you may be a cop ready to arrest you or a psychopath waiting to hack off your genitals, Leather Gulch is the ideal ambiance."[73]

For Goldstein, "The Badlands" was a sexual amusement park that offered many thrills and little risk. Goldstein draws attention to the illusions fostered by the streets and bars, suggesting a kind of sexual carnival. Here gay men construct and explore sexual spaces and identities beyond the banalities of everyday reality and the constraints of sexual normativity. This is a sexually potent fantasy space in which anonymity becomes a virtue, strangers are alluring, mysterious, and kind. If this is a fantasy space, the sex is real and more impressive than some "wet dream." For the *Time* author, this is a decaying landscape littered with so many severed penises where perverts risk disasters, natural and

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[71] See, for example, Sherry A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and Representation of Lesbian Life* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997), 145

[72] Goldstein, 16

[73] "The Gay World's," 75.

unnatural, in the desperate search for whatever intimacy can be found through a glory hole or in the cab of a pickup. Anonymity is menacing. Strangers cannot be trusted as they might represent the threat of law or, even worse, monstrous violations of it.[74] These passages represent a kind of "embodied knowing," the processes through which subjects map their own "body-ego-spaces" and those of others. As Pile states, "the urbanized subject creates an imaginary urban landscape, which is constructed partly by the material of the city, partly by the modalities of identification, partly by defensive processes and partly by the 'contents' of the unconscious."[75] In what way do these different mappings engage adaptive and defensive postures? What unconscious processes might underlie these mappings? What do they share in common and why and where do they diverge?

Henning Bech has described the city as a "world of strangers," "a large, dense and permanent cluster of heterogeneous human beings in circulation," an "ever-changing large crowd of varied strangers moving among one another."[76] The experience of the city, its tactile and visual pleasures, is thoroughly sexualized, and *Cruising* becomes the paradigmatic kind of urban movement, a constant motion, an exchange of glances, the seeking out of sexual attractions and erotic encounters, an experience that is both threatening (i.e., being exposed to the gaze of another over whom you have no control) and exhilarating (i.e., being exposed to the gaze of another over whom you have no control).[77] An "erotic intensity" in the city "tends to dissolve borders or at least cause

[74] It is ironic that the author of "The Gay World's Leather Fringe" chooses to remain anonymous.
[75] Pile, *The Body*, 236.
[76] Henning Bech, "Citysex: Representing Lust in Public," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 15.3-4 (1998), 216.
[77] Bech, 220-221

them to oscillate."[78] For Pile, the "city represents the masses," and fundamental to the urban experience is the subject's fear of being dissolved into the masses, "the fear of becoming lost in unmapped and unmappable body-ego-spaces."[79] Both of the passages above could be understood as defenses against the alienation effects of the city. Goldstein deflates that threat by making the masses, the anonymous strangers, the stuff of sexual fantasy. The *Time* author projects these fears of pain and fragmentation (castration) onto "other," distant spaces, the spaces of the obscene and forbidden, and other subjects, the predators and psychopaths that supposedly populate them, as a way of locating and containing the ubiquitous threat.

As Knopp points out, a number of factors have created the tendency to link sexual diversity and nonconformity with city life, and the association of "sexual freedom" and urban space resulted in the concentration of sexual publics in cities, a phenomenon which "has made it easier to both demonize and control them (and to sanctify majority cultures and spaces). Hence the portrayal of gentrified gay neighborhoods. . .as centers of hedonism and self-indulgence. . .as dangerous sadomasochistic underworlds."[80] For Knopp, the representation of urban space and experience is crucial to the struggle to secure social power, and such representations continue to marginalize gays. The proliferation of the discourses of modern medicine and psychoanalysis were instrumental in the construction of urban sexuality as a "social problem," figuring the city as "a world of strangers in which people relate to each other as objects and surfaces."[81] In particular,

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[78] Bech, 221.
[79] Pile, *The Body*, 208-209
[80] Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space," 149.
[81] Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space," 152.

social spaces and subjects which "threaten" or suggest the "failure" of the dominant order are coded as sexual and sexually menacing, dangerous and disorderly. Such sexual zones suggest for some the need for surveillance and control and for others a liberatory potential.[82] George Chauncey's *Gay New York* demonstrates the extent to which the development of the city and the formation of gay subjectivity are bound up in sociological concerns over urban disorder. According to early sociologists, urbanization led to a breakdown in traditional social and familial institutions unleashing socially unacceptable and desires and impulses, prostitution, and perversion.[83] Thus, the emergence of contemporary gay urban subjects has, from the outset, been posed as a sociological problem.

At the same time that the protests against *Cruising* foreground the disparities of gay and lesbian public life in the gay ghettos of the late 1970s, they also signal the degree to which gay men and lesbians perceived themselves to be acting within the "imagined geography" of a national political public sphere. While the campaign to "stop" the film began in New York City, it spread to cities across the U.S. and Canada.[84] The most significant actions taken outside of New York were in San Francisco, but the protests in San Francisco discussed here have not received much attention by gay and lesbian historians or cultural critics. As John D'Emilio pointed out in 1992, the history of gay and lesbian activism outside of New York during the 1970s, in general, has been sorely

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[82] Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space," 152.
[83] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 132; qtd. in Kenney 125.
[84] For a discussion of *Cruising* in the Canadian context, see *Flaunting It!: A Decade of Gay Journalism from The Body Politic*, Ed Jackson and Stan Persky, eds. (Toronto: Pink Triangle Press, 1982): 196-213.

neglected.[85] While this chapter cannot, obviously, write that history, it explores one important moment of the era, thinking through the specific "politics of place" that shaped the protests. Examining the protests against *Cruising* outside of New York underscores the importance of national identity that increasingly began to define gay and lesbian life in the late 1970s.

The growth and consolidation of this national public occurs at a time when national identity and the public sphere are undergoing a significant reconfiguration due in part to the emergence of the "New Right." As Lauren Berlant argues, the reactionary response to the U.S. social movements of the 1960s resulted in the "privatization of citizenship" in which citizenship became a "condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere."[86] The nationalization of heterosexuality was accompanied by what Berlant calls the "denationalization" of sexual publics.[87] That is, once gays, lesbians, and queers were positioned as antithetical to the family and represented as having abandoned the "core values" of traditional America and undermined an idealized patriotism through their valorization of difference, they were seen as "outside" of the national body. In her analysis of sexuality and citizenship, Shane Phelan states frankly, "Sexual minorities are not citizens of the United States even in the thin terms of liberal theory."[88] And as Diane Richardson argues, "it would seem that very often the role of sexuality in the construction

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[85] D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 272 n. 2.
[86] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 5.
[87] Berlant, 189.
[88] Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and the Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia, Temple UP, 2001), 5.

of concepts of nationality is not merely linked to heterosexuality, but to a form of heterosexuality that is to varying extents anti-lesbian as well as anti-gay."[89]

More compelling than her treatment of the politicized audience is Judith Mayne's understanding of cinematic pleasure and the role of fantasy in watching film. Pleasure in the cinema resists dualisms. That is, no *specifically* male and female, and, for that matter, straight and gay, pleasures can be presumed to be experienced by spectators. Cinematic pleasure escapes such categorizations.[90] Mayne uses the portrait—specifically, the portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945)—as a metaphor for spectatorship. As the ever-changing portrait is viewed from different positions, it takes on multiple meanings. Spectatorship emerges as the *relationships* between these viewpoints, throwing into question the easy alignment of viewing and sexual difference and viewing and sexual identity, and foregrounding the ways in which any particular location is already the result of a negotiation between different, conflicting sites of observation.[91]

Part of the fluidity of cinematic pleasure arguably stems from the nature of fantasy. Drawing on the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, and the film theorists inspired by them, Mayne explores fantasy as it relates to viewing and desire.[92] Laplanche and Pontalis's conception of fantasy has numerous implications for understanding film viewing. First, fantasy bridges the divide between the conscious and the unconscious. This understanding does not require the "decoding approach" that

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[89] Diane Richardson, "Sexuality and Citizenship," *Sociology* 32.1 (1998), 93.
[90] Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 105-122, 157-172.
[91] Mayne, 121.
[92] See especially, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds., Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (New York: Methuen, 1986), 5-34.

maintains the separation between manifest and latent content. A film does not, then, have an unconscious or conceal the "author's" or spectator's unconscious fantasies. Rather, a film can be understood as engaging one of a number of original fantasies (e.g., the primal scene, seduction fantasies, castration fantasies) which are informed by the social, which are not only unconscious but preconscious and conscious as well. Second, not only can the fantasy scenario itself take a number of different shapes, into that fantasy are multiple entry points. Because the film might stage the fantasy of seduction does not mean that, in the case of father and daughter, for example, that the viewer must take up the either the position of the father or, conversely, the daughter solely (particularly if it is assumed that male viewers must take up the position of the father and female viewers the position of the daughter). Mayne, along with others has suggested the notion of "oscillation," as opposed to identification, as a concept for understanding the operations of spectatorship.[93] Finally, Laplanche and Pontalis argue that fantasy is the "*staging* of desire, fantasy as a form of mise-en-scene."[94] Therefore, the spectator is not in pursuit of his or her own object of desire, but is actually caught up in or identifying with the play of desire itself, again allowing for a range of investments, positions, and pleasures.[95]

While Carrither's "The Audiences of *The Boys in the Band*," already briefly mentioned, is not a psychoanalytic account of the act of watching the film, it does pose a number of the same dilemmas which Mayne is attempting to circumvent, as well as some of its own difficulties. It is worth summarizing Carrither's line of argumentation. The

[93] Mayne, 86-88.
[94] Mayne, 88.
[95] Mayne, 88-89.

author claims that the play and the film versions of *The Boys in the Band* reproduce practically identical stereotypes in spite of the changing landscape of sexuality in the U.S. caused by the gay and lesbian liberation movement that had come into prominence in the two years between the two productions. Thus, the narrative is problematic for gay men, especially since no characters can manage to elicit the gay male viewer's sympathy, characters with which the viewer can identify through, primarily because none of the characters could possibly mirror the gay male audience member's sense of identity. In the author's words, "none of these men represents what might be considered an acceptable image of gayness because they are too stereotypical."[96] Carrithers argues that Hank and Larry, two lovers in the film, are the least stereotypical, yet, "gay viewers must question whether this is truly a positive image."[97] Hank and Larry are not monogamous and not even truly in love. Therefore, they are hardly "suitable role models" for gay men who desire such a relationship, and moreover, they further the assumption of heterosexual audience members that gay male relationships are fleeting. Ultimately, the film reproduces in the gay male viewer a sense of guilt and shame, coming to the film expecting to see "his community, his life, and his sexuality" only to realize that he can be neither the subject or the object of the gaze.

While the film is both an object lesson and a great disappointment for the gay male audience member, it "'functions' to the advantage of a straight spectator."[98] The "token straight" man in the film, Alan, becomes the point of identification for the

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[96] Joe Carrithers, "The Audiences of *The Boys in the Band*," in *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23.2 (1995), 65.
[97] Carrithers, 68.
[98] Carrithers, 65.

heterosexual viewer, thereby allowing the heterosexual male viewer a certain distance from the "threat" of homosexuality. He simply watches dispassionately, judgmentally, leaving with his sense of identity confirmed. The straight male audience member, according to Carrithers, attends the film in order to confront his fears of homosexuality, and leaves feeling more "confidently heterosexual."[99] While *The Boys in the Band* does attempt to unsettle the distinction between hetero/homo, the audience, straight and gay, cannot accept such ambiguities. Thus, the film reaffirms a valorized heterosexual male identity and a demonized gay male identity, leaving both intact.

While these claims are somewhat plausible, they are questionable in absence of any historical proof. Carrithers quotes several gay men relating their experiences of the film, but not any male viewers who identify as heterosexual, relying instead on previous assertions, by, for example, Vito Russo, of what heterosexual men *must*, it is *presumed*, be experiencing while watching the film. Additionally, Carrithers assigns questionable motivations to viewers. Gay men go to the movies in order to sympathize with gay characters and find a positive portrait of themselves. Heterosexual male viewers go to the movies in order to reaffirm their sense of heterosexuality. Their relationship to the film is necessarily antagonistic because they are not, themselves, gay. In spite of the title, Carrither's article is ultimately about stereotyping and not audiences. Moreover, Carrithers assumes an equivalence between the sexual identity of the viewer and the sexual identity of the character with whom he or she can identify. Carrithers also reserves the act of critical viewing for the gay male audience member, suggesting that the

[99] Carrithers, 67.

heterosexual male viewer does not have a similar capacity, while critical viewing itself seems to be limited to discerning a positive role model, "positive" itself being defined in a limited way. Carrithers does not allow for the possibility that heterosexual male viewers are caught up in the play of desire, however problematic it may seem.

What goes on in the mainstream press in relation to *Cruising* is not so obviously dichotomous. In the wake of *Cruising*'s release, many writers in the alternative presses did begin to question the possible effects that the film would have on straight audiences. Both *The Sentinel* and the *Bay Area Reporter* wondered if the film could stir audiences the way demonstrators expected it would. Aaron Walden writes that the film is not a "time bomb," simply a "bomb." "Ultimately," according to Walden, "the film represents a false threat because it is hard to imagine anyone being roused to any sort of action other than leaving the theater in disgust."[100]

Yet an examination of the film's critical reception in the mainstream press reveals not simply an aversion to the film's graphic violence and sexuality, but a subtle and fascinating mixture of desire and disgust. Through considering how the film provoked not only gay men and lesbians but mainstream, male liberal, critics and how, moreover, they negotiated their own interpretations in response and, often, in opposition, to those offered by the protestors, we can more fully understand the complex ways in which the space of *Cruising*'s reception becomes its own kind of third space. What I want to suggest here is that an analysis of the reception of the film can help point out the possibilities and limitations of disrupting notions of sexuality and space.

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[100] Aaron Walden, "*Cruising*," *The Sentinel* 22 Feb. 1980, 9.

Months of publicity, which the protests against the film helped generate and a pre-screening press conference turned the film's premiere into an event. The reviews reflect the same frustrations with the film's ambiguity that was expressed during a press conference held by Friedkin.[101] The director first told the audience that he did not know who the killer in the film is, then stated that the film's killer is heterosexual, but also suggested that there are several killers in *Cruising*, yet refused to provide any psychological motivation for the murders or discuss whether or not the film's ambiguities were deliberate, stressing rather, that a great deal of research went into making the film and the story it tells is accurate.[102] The reviewers echo Friedkin, repeatedly describing *Cruising* as muddled, inept, confusing, evasive, unclear, baffling, vague, and deliberately misleading. Most critics seem to think that Friedkin, who loosely based the script on Gerald Walker's novel, concocts a murder mystery which he cannot or will not solve because the film itself is too inhibited and too imperceptive. David Denby claims, for example, that Friedkin is too "scared" to implicate himself in the subject which he is exploiting. A review in *The New Yorker* suggests that the ambiguity in *Cruising* is "meant to trade upon lack of knowledge of the nether homosexual world by encouraging a great many uncertainties about it, thus to thrill us with a prurient fear," replacing prior assumptions about the gay S/M scene with a "horrendous reality" presented with

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[101] My generalizations about the reactions to *Cruising* are taken from the following reviews, listed chronologically: Charles Champlin, *Los Angeles Times* 10 Feb. 1980, 1; Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, 15 Feb. 1980, C6; Joseph Gelmis, *Newsday* 15 Feb. 1980, 7; Archer Winsten, *New York Post* 15 Feb. 1980: 39; David Ansen, *Newsweek*, 18 Feb. 1980, 92; Frank Rich, *Time*, 18 Feb. 1980, 67; Andrew Sarris, *The Village Voice*, 18 Feb. 1980, 47; *The New Yorker* 18 Feb. 1980, 126-128; David Denby, *New York* 3 Mar. 1980, 72; Robert Hatch, *Nation*, 23 Feb. 1980, 218-220; Stanley Kauffmann, *New Republic*, 15 Mar. 1980, 24-25; Lloyd Gruver, *Films in Review* Apr. (1980) 242; John Coleman, *New Statesman* 12 Sept. 1980, 24; Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin* Oct. 1980, 189.

[102] Geoffery Stokes, "*Cruising* Vague, Friedkin More So," *Village Voice* 11 Feb. 1980, 20.

"thrusting directness."[103] The experience of watching *Cruising* is consistently described as sordid, shocking, depressing, and painful. Viewers attribute a certain aggressive, violent, phallic power to the film, whether it is thrusting, exploding, "wielding shock," or hitting the viewer over the head or between the eyes. The critics often describe their own experiences in visceral terms, drawing particular attention to the unpleasant visual, tactile, and other sensory qualities that the film evokes and the bodily responses they elicit. For one critic, "*Cruising* is the sort of movie that's a failure unless it evokes a physical reaction—like disgust or fear."[104]

One theme that unfolds in the criticism of the film is that for all of its excesses, when it comes to sexuality, the film refuses to "go far enough."[105] In spite of all of the qualifications that the sex presented in *Cruising*, in addition to being merely simulated, is disgusting, disturbing, repugnant, appalling, and unerotic, there does not seem to be enough of it.[106] According to Robert Hatch, "the group scenes contain very little that I could identify as genital contact, however perverse; it looked to me like obscenely infantile messing around."[107] The scenes inside of The Cockpit, the fictional S/M bar based on The Mineshaft in New York, and the sexuality it exudes hold a particular fascination for these viewers. Stanley Kauffmann writes,

> The only socially noteworthy matter in this film, for me, is the histronicism of the S&M gays. Each of them, as he lounges about a

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[103] "Mean Streets," *The New Yorker* 10 Feb. 1980, 15.
[104] Gelmis, 7.
[105] Rich, 67.
[106] I agree with Aitken's premise that the reviews of the film not only demonstrate the viewers' attitudes toward the film but to homosexuality and S-M. However, I do not agree with his interpretations of the various reviews from New York that he selected to discuss. I believe that the "attitudes" expressed are much more subtle and ambiguous than Aitken allows for. This is a critical difference, for reasons to be suggested at length throughout this chapter.
[107] Hatch, 218.

> smoky dim bar in some sort of rig, waiting for an approach or an approachable, seems to be acting like mad. These bank tellers and bus boys and lawyers by day seem to get as much pleasure out of the roles they play at night as out of the sex that follows.[108]

Denby, too, recalls the bar scenes in vivid detail. He does not find in them the same pleasurable sense of masquerade, however, but a superficial, meaningless, dehumanizing decadence:

> Dozens and dozens of muscle boys, all wearing black leather, studded wrist bands, and vests, stand around or dance while Friedkin moves the camera back and forth (sometimes at crotch level), without ever creating anything more than the most fragmentary of personal encounters. The bar scenes are so static, so obviously posed, that we seem to be watching a fashion show in shaved heads and mustaches.[109]

Variety worries that the bar scenes blur the line between R- and X-rated material: "To put it bluntly, if 'R' allows the showing of a man greasing up his fist followed by the rising ecstasy of a second man held in chains by others, then there's only one close-up left for the 'X'."[110]

In particular, however, critics puzzle over why such an voyeuristic film, which Vincent Canby writes pays "leering attention" to most minute details, would avoid showing Steve attempting to pass as a leather man, doing what leather men in S/M clubs do. The caption to the film still from *Cruising* accompanying Andrew Sarris's review in the *Village Voice* that shows Burns being cruised by Richards in Central Park, asks, "Why doesn't *Cruising* make clear how involved the Al Pacino character is in the gay

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[108] Kauffmann, 25.
[109] Denby, 72.
[110] Harlan Jacobson, "General Cinema and *Cruising*," *Variety* 6 Feb. 1980: 4.

scene?"[111] The question is repeated throughout numerous reviews. Joseph Gelmis, for example, asks, "Why wallow in the perverse stuff and then keep us in the dark about the true character of the one person in the movie we're supposed to care about?"[112] Richard Combs writes that he suspects the "true offensiveness" of *Cruising* "lies more in what it doesn't show, the things it relegates as unmentionable off-screen matter. Its suppression of what its undercover cop actually does in order to pass as gay."[113] For David Ansen, *Cruising* "does look unflinchingly at violence and kinkiness, but it avoids answering all the key dramatic questions about it hero. How far does Pacino have to go in his role as decoy?"[114] Denby asks, "When Burns hunts for the killer, does he have sex with the men who approach him? Friedkin doesn't tell us. Is Burns at all attracted to gay men? Friedkin doesn't tell us that either. We have to guess what's going on inside of Burns."[115] Viewers of *Cruising* want psychological depth, but the film does not "even begin to scratch the surface" of its characters.[116] For Denby, the characters are reduced to their "flesh," devoid of any interiority.

Most of the critics frame *Cruising* in terms of its social relevance, specifically its sociological implications. Indeed, Lloyd Gruver refers to the film's peddling of sensationalism under the guise of "sociological concern," Charles Champlain to its pointless "sociological story," and Sarris to its lack of any sort of "sociological hypothesis." For most of the critics, not only is *Cruising* not entertaining, it does not

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[111] Sarris, 47.
[112] Gelmis, 7.
[113] Combs, 189.
[114] Ansen, 92.
[115] Denby, 72.
[116] Ansen, 92.

provide any sociological insight, a new understanding, does not show any compassion. The film neglects its responsibilities to its subject matter and to its audience. Champlin, for example, writes that the film depicts a "small, sick segment of society" and thus carries a "real and heavy responsibility not only to avoid exploitation" but to leave the audience with a "new understanding."[117] For Denby, the movie is especially sordid and depressing because "it is told without insight or love."[118]

These responses—what they denote and connote about space and about sexuality, the conflicts that we see them maneuver around, the sexual, social, and political fantasies that the film activates for them—can best be understood as mappings of contemporary American culture, space, and sexuality. While my own understanding of the reception of *Cruising* is not strictly psychoanalytic, it shares with Mayne's theorizing an understanding of cinematic pleasure and fantasy that avoids these rigid dichotomies, allows for a multiplicity of fantasies and points of view, does not essentialize viewers at the same time that it does not deny that viewing is informed by one's experience outside of the theater, and allows for the possibility that viewers, no matter what their sexual identity, become the subject of the film's play of desire. Responses to *Cruising* may be understood as a way of mapping urban space and sexual identity. They are a means by which viewers negotiate their way through a maze of points of observation. They reflect an investment in the erotic possibilities of urban space and express a disgust over its seeming pathology. These responses are informed by both the discourses that position urban sexuality as a type of liberatory potential and those that see it as evidence of the

[117] Champlin, 1.
[118] Denby, 72.

decay of the cityscape. They are neither obviously homophobic nor homosexual/homoerotic. Rather, they seem to oscillate between the two, revealing, possibly, the third space of reception where sexual identity is not entirely an accurate predictor of sexual, social, and political fantasies.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to trace the unfixing and refixing of gay identity up to the time of the film's release, situating these identities spatially and socially. Gay subjectivity was anchored in the history of city planning, in the experiences of urban migration and gentrification, in places (e.g., The Village, The Castro, The Mineshaft) and in site specific practices (e.g., street protest, S/M, male drag, anti-gay violence). I have also suggested how these places can be mapped, often in contradictory ways, as "zones of liberation" or spaces of depravity and disease, revealing much about the investments, desires, and fears of the mapping subject. Pile's claims regarding urban subjects' mappings of body-ego-spaces resonates with the experiences of spectators: they create imaginary landscapes partly from the film being viewed, its "contents," and the material world beyond it and partly through their own conscious and unconscious mental processes. Until now, I have emphasized the maps of gay male desire and straight male paranoia, but this is an incomplete picture. There are passages which seem to move between these poles, negotiating positions that are neither one nor the other while being intimately linked to both. In order to understand film viewing beyond the hetero/homo dualism, I attempted to emphasize how the reception strategies of male viewers complicate essentialist models like Carrithers's which divide the hypothetical audience

into straight or gay and then generalize about why certain films are "safe" for all straight viewers and unappealing to all gay male viewers. Through *Cruising*, some heterosexual males actively sought "danger," and their responses reflect their excitement over the possibility of exploring non-straight desires as well as disappointment that their desires went unfulfilled. In fact, their responses attempt to undermine the rigid distinction between straight and gay that the film seems to insist upon and seem to take pleasure in the possibility. Still, a moralizing thread in the reception literature sees the subject matter as "sick," a thread that is complicit with the dominant discourse which constructs urban sexuality as a "social problem" and that attempts to assuage the anxiety which contemporary urban sexuality arouses by projecting it onto deviant others. Nonetheless, these viewers seem to experience *Cruising* as a "third space"—open, ambivalent, exciting, frustrating, troubling, and not entirely straight. It may be that *Cruising*, more than any other film of its era, taps into the struggles and difficulties as well as the sensations and pleasures of urban sexuality (e.g., appearances, fragmentation, voyeurism, masquerade) and harnesses the same sort of erotic intensity that makes borders in the city oscillate and dissolve.

To understand the varied responses that *Cruising* managed to elicit, we must situate them alongside the cultural, social, and political conflicts that were taking place at the time of the film's release: struggles over sexuality and urban space, gender and politics, the erotic and political uses of space, the meaning of spaces and spatial practices, unconscious struggles in the maintenance of subjectivity. Once this is done, we can see that the public responses to *Cruising* are integral to what Roberto Alejandro would call the hermeneutic construction of the public sphere. The public struggles that are played

out over cultural texts are, for Alejandro, as much about the material context in which they are produced as they are about the content presented. They are a means by which subjects attempt to interpret and contest the past and the present and their place in them. The public sphere, for Alejandro, is "an arena for the fusion of horizons" in which "this fusion does not abolish difference," but, rather, "seeks to construct the public sphere as . . . a border zone where different identities negotiate."[119] It is this fusion of horizons that I have attempted to draw attention to throughout this chapter, the fusion of subjectivities, sexualities, spaces, and points of observation. This fusion does not do away with differences. There are still "dominant and subordinated discourses," but no "fixed boundaries between them."[120] Like Lefebvre argues, to change the world, you must first change space. It may be that the vocabularies and practices of third spaces, to the degree that they unfix these boundaries and surmount divisions, play a crucial role in renewing the struggle for the transformation of subjectivities and space.

[119] Robert Alejandro, *Hermeneutics, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere* (New York: State U of New York P, 1993), 162.
[120] Alejandro, 206.

Chapter Four: AIDS Films, Cultural Memory, Public Space

In Simon Watney's aptly-title article, "Acts of Memory," he reflects on a range of cultural responses to the AIDS crisis from "AIDS kitsch" to "high art." He considers how they do or do not register a "truthful memorializing of our losses" and why we "cannot help but imagine the world as it might have been, if not for HIV."[1] During a brief discussion of film and HIV/AIDS, Watney praises the "luminous, elegiac films of Derek Jarman, Bill Sherwood, Marlon Riggs."[2] He does not spend any time elaborating what he means in labeling these filmmakers the way that he has except to suggest that their films are proof that cultural productions can communicate "what an epidemic means to those who could not otherwise grasp it."[3] Perhaps that explains what Watney means by luminous; these "brilliant" filmmakers have helped "shed light" on the difficult subject of HIV/AIDS, from the point of view of a gay men with HIV, through their films.

What he means when he says that these filmmakers have created *elegiac* films, however, is *not* so clear. What does he mean? How did Watney come to see, for example, Bill Sherwood's only feature, *Parting Glances* (1986), as an elegiac film? Is it a "rivalrous attack on a dead but still overwhelming precursor figure" as elegy has sometimes been understood.[4] That, at least, seems unlikely as Watney's article is preoccupied with grieving and memorializing loss and not attacking and renouncing what

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[1] Simon Watney, "Acts of Memory," in *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 168.
[2] Watney, "Acts," 166.
[3] Watney, "Acts," 166.
[4] Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithica: Cornell UP, 1997), 3.

has come before. *Parting Glances*, as elegy, would seem to be less concerned with the "anxiety of influence" than with the work of mourning, and, as such, for Watney, it is more of a poetic meditation on love and loss, a celebration of the life and the grieving of the death of a loved one. Arguably, Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993) and Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1990) are more obviously elegiac films. For one thing, at first glance, it is not entirely obvious who (or what) is being mourned in *Parting Glances*, whereas *Blue*, in its use of the blue screen, for example, as the emblematic expression of the onset of Jarman's own AIDS-related blindness, is saturated with a sense of loss and grief. For another thing, as a conventional, narrative film, which neither *Blue* nor *Tongues Untied* are, *Parting Glances* is not obviously "poetic" as "elegiac" would seem to imply and as *Tongues Untied*, in its reliance on a sort of black urban poetics to explore homoerotic desire between black men, for example, more clearly is.

Is Watney's understanding just wrong? If not, what about the film lends itself to being read in elegiac terms? What do the film and elegy share? What about the cultural context in which Watney reflects on the film influences his choice to emphasize the film as elegy over the more overtly "political" position he takes elsewhere, one in favor of an AIDS "activist aesthetic" and a politically-informed criticism? What are the implications of this choice? Are elegy, as a practice of mourning, and activism, as political praxis, reconcilable? These are *some* of the questions that guide my thinking about the issues explored in this and the next two chapters on "AIDS films."

This chapter focuses on the ways in which "AIDS films" and the critical discourse about them respond to and in various ways attempt to explain, repair, or mourn the

enormous historical ruptures in gay culture and identity that began with the advent of the AIDS crisis. By "AIDS films" I mean, following Kylo-Patrick Hart,

> any fictional or fictionalized narrative movie which features at least one character who either (1) has been infected with HIV, (2) has developed full-blown AIDS, and/or (3) is grieving the recent death of a loved one from AIDS and which also explores the process of such characters confronting realities associated with transmitting, living with, and/or dying from HIV or AIDS.[5]

The AIDS crisis is a personal crisis for the many confronting its impact, a public health crisis, and a cultural crisis. As a cultural crisis, it is a series of traumatic historical events with specific effects: it shattered shared norms and assumptions; exposed cultural structures and how and who they serve and fail; revealed certain cultural discontinuities and how they operated; and created the possibility for the blurring and crossing of bodily, societal, cultural, ideological, moral boundaries and categories formerly assumed to be impervious at the same time that it tried to shore up those same borders to prevent such crossings.[6]

The three AIDS films this study emphasizes are *Parting Glances* (1986), written and directed by Bill Sherwood; *Longtime Companion* (1990), written by Craig Lucas and directed by Norman Rene; and *Philadelphia* (1993), written by Ron Nyswaner and directed by Jonathan Demme. After placing the films and their audiences in a historical context, my analyses of them and my discussion of the critical literature written in response to them will be structured around several themes: gay subjectivities and

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[5] Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (New York: The Haworth Press), 9.
[6] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 258.

sexualities in the wake of HIV/AIDS; the role of memory and affect in the audiences' understandings of the films; the construction and importance of space in the films and in the practices of viewing and writing about them; and, finally, the interconnected concepts of mourning, melancholia, and nostalgia as they come to bear on these discussions.

Parting Glances is a romance that follows the lives of three gay men in New York City over the course of twenty-four hours. The relationship between Michael (Richard Ganoung) and his lover Robert (John Bolger) is strained by Robert's decision to move to Africa to work for several years. Nick (Steve Buscemi), Michael's ex-lover, is HIV-positive, and Michael has taken on the role of his primary care-giver. Throughout the film, Nick fears he is being stalked by a "grim reaper." Meanwhile, Michael day dreams about the time before AIDS, when he and Nick spent their summers on Fire Island. *Longtime Companion* is an ensemble drama that was originally produced for "American Playhouse" (PBS) about a group of gay male friends in Manhattan whose lives are initially disrupted and finally decimated by the appearance of HIV/AIDS. The film opens July 3, 1981, as the main characters discuss an article printed that morning in the *New York Times* about infectious diseases that are showing up at alarming rates primarily among gay men in the US. The film ends eight years later, in July 1989, with a trip to Fire Island as the surviving friends discuss what life will be like once a "cure" for AIDS is found and imagine that the friends that they have lost to AIDS-related deaths, too, have returned to the island for one last party. *Philadelphia* is a courtroom melodrama, and is, unlike the other two films discussed in this chapter, a Hollywood star vehicle, featuring Tom Hanks as Andrew Beckett, a white, gay lawyer who is fired from a prestigious law firm for incompetence. Beckett rightly believes that he was fired because he is HIV-

positive and hires Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), a straight African-American, as his legal counsel when he decides to sue his former employee for his wrongful dismissal. As the court case unfolds, the film spends a great deal of time exploring the relationship of the two men as they confront and attempt to work through their differences and cope with Andrew's impending death.

In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Marita Sturken's primary concern is with the "popularization of history," or the ways in which history is transmitted and transformed by popular culture and its audiences, forming what she calls a "field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history."[7] The films and critical literature under discussion here are "memory texts," sites where cultural memories, and the related phenomena of affect and space, are experienced, produced, shaped, revised, abandoned, and/or forgotten. Cultural memory is the product of collective processes of narrating the past in order to give it meaning. Cultural memories are played out across an entire range of sites, institutions, audiences: the government, the academy, commercial music, television, and film, the arts, folklore, and activism, each with their own modes of address and audiences/publics. With cultural memories circulating within so many spheres and reaching many different, if overlapping, audiences, what emerges are complex and often contradictory images of the past. Sturken suggests that these contradictions are symptomatic, in part, of the increasingly blurred boundaries of art and commodity culture. These contradictions also exist, however, because "cultural meaning does not

[7] Sturken, 1.

reside with the text of a particular object so much as it is produced in the act of 'consumption,' wherein the viewer/citizen engages with its meaning." [8] Memory texts elicit cultural memories but are not simply repositories for them. Again, it is best to understand each of the three AIDS films discussed in this chapter as this kind of "memory text." Each activates, shapes, represses, and legitimates collective memories of HIV/AIDS. The films and their intertexts are sites of cultural memory and the collective "working through" of the trauma initiated by the AIDS crisis and a collective remaking of the world.

Sturken points out that instability and contingency characterize memory which is shaped by the context in which it is conceived. If cultural memory is as "unreliable" as this, then its importance lies not so much in its ability to capture "truth" as in its ability to act as a marker of "collective desires, needs and self-definitions."[9] For Sturken, cultural memory offers a way of confronting and transforming these experiences of loss without "letting the tension of the past in the present fade away."[10] Sturken's understanding of cultural memory resonates with the concept of "popular memory" as defined by Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins. It is a shared public fantasy about the past which is put into service of structuring the present.[11] Cultural memory is not strictly personal memory nor is it History. Rather, it is "based on the dialectic between autobiography and public

[8] Sturken, 258.
[9] Sturken, 2.
[10] Sturken, 17.
[11] Sturken, 117.

events" as "people strive to place themselves in history, using the past to understand their present lives."[12]

Using the examples of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., Sturken argues that "memory is often perceived to be located in specific places or objects."[13] Both memorials help the living first to locate in order to remember and honor the dead. Survivors of the AIDS crisis travel to the site where the AIDS quilt is on exhibition in order to find and speak to the dead as though they somehow reside there. She concludes, following Pierre Nora, that "memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events."[14] Kenneth E. Foote writes in *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, "memory provides an important bond between culture and landscape, because human modifications of the environment are often related to the ways in which societies wish to sustain and efface memories."[15] Sites of violence and tragedy can be subjected to the processes of obliteration, designation, rectification, and/or sanctification in ways that create an actual "landshape of memory."[16] The sites of events deemed shameful can be "wiped off the map," as it were, in an attempt to enforce a collective forgetting, while the sites of events deemed appropriately heroic or tragic can be sanctified through the construction of a memorial or entire "fields of care" which sustain and shape a collective sense of loss. [17]

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[12] Sturken, 120.
[13] Sturken, 10-11.
[14] See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memorie," *Representations 26* (Spring 1989): 7-25.
[15] Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, Rev. and Updt. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1997), 33.
[16] Foote, 27.
[17] I find Foote's analysis of sites of obliteration fascinating though somewhat outside of the scope of this discussion. He makes the point that often the "shameful" events that occurred at these sites "cannot be

This landshape of memory serves several functions in the present. It helps define local, regional, and national identities; it helps position the present in relation to historical struggles; and it creates "rallying points" for present-day events.[18] The landshape of memory is not static. It is often the subject of discussion and reinterpretation. As social, economic, political, and cultural changes impact the lives of people, those people look back and debate the meaning of past events, beliefs, and values. "Often this debate focuses on place—the actual site of the event—and whether it deserves to be remembered or forgotten."[19] In this process, sites only previously deserving of designation, for example, can become sanctified and take on new meaning while formerly sanctified sites can become rectified places and lose their place in the social landscape.

Sturken would seem right, then, to suggest that memory is understood to be located in particular places. Indeed, this seems represented in the films I am studying. In both *Parting Glances* and *Longtime Companion*, the action shuttles back and forth between Manhattan and Fire Island, both sites which have privileged positions in many

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forgotten but should not be remembered" (208). Therefore, they "are held in a limbo of conflicting emotions" (208). Because obliteration suppresses the normal processes of grieving, a concern that I will take up later in relation to HIV/AIDS, it tends to produce a pathological landscape. The process of obliteration is seldom successful, however, and these sites remain significant sources of fascination, continuing to draw attention to themselves. They become the subjects of "sick" jokes, are frequently vandalized, are visited by those seeking to take relics, attract other "shameful" events or more violence, and become the subject of "urban legends," as well as popular music, books, TV shows, and films (209-210). Foote points out that other cultures have rituals that remove the stigma or shame from such places so that they can be returned to use, but that no such rituals exist in American culture (25). The creation of pathological landscapes of forgetfulness in the US seems inevitable to the degree that these spaces cannot be freed from guilt and blame. Importantly, Sturken emphasizes at several points throughout her book that American subjects experience themselves as "American" when "engaging with technologies of forgetting" (259).

[18] While discussing different "transitional" sites, those that are somehow designated as historically significant yet have not been fully sanctified because the interpretations of the events that they embody are still too contested and conflicted, Foote rightly suggests that one such "rallying point" is The Stonewall Inn in New York.

[19] Foote, 28.

historical narratives for the creation and elaboration of gay identities and sexualities as well as the emergence and experience of HIV/AIDS. Philadelphia, too, is important for the construction of American identity and notions of "freedom," "independence," and "unity." *Philadelphia*, thus, narrates AIDS within a context somewhat peripheral to the "epicenter" of the crisis, in the sense that the first decade of the epidemic in the US hit hardest gay men in larger cities (New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles), yet the city is central to notions of a national culture. In each film the setting is a significant location in regards to cultural memories about the AIDS crisis and its place within a collective "imagined geography" of "America," and each encourages its own set of associations that the "cognitive maps" of those doing the remembering further mediate.

In a discussion of AIDS memoirs, John Clum makes the point that "[s]pace is central to . . . mainstream AIDS works" because the "general population" are encouraged to see AIDS as encroaching from the outside and making its world "smaller and more vulnerable."[20] At the same time, as I will show, the advent of AIDS fundamentally changes the urban gay landscape. Place figures centrally into the discussion of these films because, as I have been suggesting, the AIDS crisis has a geography. Let me be clear that I am not trying to suggest, as has been done, that "geography is destiny." The specific article being referenced here, "Mapping the Epidemic: Geography as Destiny," is slippery on this point. On the one hand, the title undeniably suggests a certainty about the inevitability of contracting HIV based on place and notes, for example, that antibody

[20] John M. Clum, "'And Once I Had It All': AIDS Narratives and Memories of an American Dream," in Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, eds. *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 206.

rates rise with proximity to New York City, while also assuring that the epidemic is still so localized that the matter of a few blocks can make a world of difference.[21] On the other hand, the article quotes Pauline Thomas, identified as the "AIDS surveillance director of New York City," as warning not to take "AIDS maps too literally. Geography is *not* destiny, she insists."[22] Repeatedly, the article undercuts that position, however. One New York epidemiologist, a Dr. Ernest Druker claims, for example, that it's "not just what you do, but where you do it" that is a gauge of risk for contracting HIV.[23]

Arguably, mapping the epidemic's sites of risk is more accurate and less insidious than focusing on those deemed "risk groups"—until we realize that the two are easily conflated. Suggesting that AIDS has a geography is not to encourage the strategic mapping of the epidemic in order to help sight any potential "bridge to the general population" without regard for those deemed "risk groups."[24] "Mapping the Epidemic" reveals that the concern for the "general population" and the desire to keep the crisis from making "inroads into the heartland" via the pernicious "AIDS carriers" who smuggle HIV across the border that separates them from the wider public motivates this strategy for producing power/knowledge . This type of mapping of the epidemic, monitoring the behaviors of the "infected" at risk sites and tracking their migrations from those locations outward, is oriented toward protecting the "heterosexual majority" from the "slow seepage" of HIV/AIDS from risk sites to more "innocent" places.[25] This is a strategy for

[21] Patricia Gadsby, "Mapping the Epidemic: Geography as Destiny," *Discover* 9.4 (April 1988), 28.
[22] Gadsby, 30.
[23] Gadsby, 29.
[24] Gadsby, 31.
[25] Gadsby, 30.

protecting and controlling social boundaries that keep the deviant and undesirable at a distance and proceeds from a fear about border crossings giving shape to the desire for containment. It is "deployed to largely reassure the artificially invented 'general population' that they are 'safe' from taint, and to justify, thereby, a refusal to examine the underlying decay of social infrastructure."[26] Throughout this chapter I will suggest other possibilities for mapping the AIDS crisis that do not reproduce the paranoid surveillance and containment that have historically marked thinking about HIV/AIDS in the US.

I want as well to explore how these three films have been integrated into the processes of coping with the epidemic and the losses it has inflicted, the processes of remaking a meaningful world in the wake of AIDS. I argue that two broadly defined tactics are bound up with this process of remaking meaning in the midst of a devastating epidemic that impacts our understanding of AIDS films.[27] The first tactic centers on the critical engagement with the notion of "identity" in order to rethink the gay subject against, on the one hand, constricting definitions circulating within gay culture and, on the other hand, more blatantly homophobic and AIDS-phobic conceptions of gay men circulating in dominant culture. The second, related tactic is enlisting the films in a recuperation of the "gay past," attempting to draw on, sustain, and revise cultural memories of places, people and events in order to give shape and meaning to the present

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[26] Julia Epstein, "AIDS, Stigma, and Narratives of Containment," *American Imago* 49.3 (1992), 298.

[27] The use of "tactic" here is quite deliberate. It is meant to suggest the distinction that Michel de Certeau makes between "tactics" and "strategies" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, particularly in their relation to space and time. "Tactics" are actions "determined by the absence of a proper locus" (37). It is an action "lacking its own place" (38). For me, the term "tactic" suggests the very kind of "placelessness" that the AIDS crisis inflicted. Moreover, much like the ways in which cultural memory relies on the creative reshaping of the past, a tactic is a "clever utilization of time" (38-39). A tactic is, like the processes of remaking meaning in the wake of the AIDS crisis, a "making do" here and now.

and the future. Contrary to the ideological analyses of these films which posit that they merely reinforce negative stereotypes of gay men and people with HIV/AIDS (PWAs), reproduce an anti-gay ideology at worst or simply promote a liberal notion of tolerance of cultural/sexual differences at best, or are not made for and, therefore, not "suitable" for a gay audience, I want to suggest the ways in which gay viewers and writers have used these films to other ends.

AIDS AS GAY IDENTITY CRISIS

Identity, the past, and the issue of space become preoccupations for many gay men in the wake of AIDS. Esther Newton writes that it "has been understandably hard for gay men [on Fire Island] to deal with the fact that disease and death were attacking them through the very sexual activities that were central to their sense of identity, their capacity to love, and their community."[28] The advent of AIDS disrupts gay men's sense of identity because it is intimately entangled with their sexuality, sexual desire providing the very foundation of gay identity. HIV/AIDS impinges on the sexual practices of gay men because of their "potentially lethal effect," and common conceptions of gay identity begin to "unravel" as many abandon a number of these practices according to Stephen Schecter. This unraveling leads to the questioning of identity and desire, leaving people "with a detached sense of moorings." Then, he continues, "[m]ore questions arise. One insight is soon followed by its opposite. The interrogation of the present rapidly becomes an interrogation of the past."[29] Sturken writes, "the prevailing popular notion that AIDS

[28] Ester Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 291.
[29] Stephen Schecter, *The AIDS Notebooks* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1990), 267.

can wipe out the body's memory and erase a person's identity are directly responsible for the desire to create memory and identity from the epidemic."[30]

These viewing tactics, the first focused on the remaking of identity and the second engaged with the possibilities of memory, are shaped in relation to the widespread notions of the impact of HIV/AIDS on memory, identity, the body, and the space(s) they occupy. In multiple, contradictory ways we have, whether our HIV-status is seropositive or seronegative, consciously and unconsciously engaged in remaking meaning in the wake of the AIDS crisis: having safer sex, watching the evening news, quilting, meditating, refusing to wear a condom, going to a funeral, attending a candlelight vigil, joining ACT-UP, protesting the CDC or the pharmaceutical companies, refusing to go to another funeral, taking medication, quitting ACT-UP and joining Queer Nation, buying porn, getting a gym membership, reading Foucault, planning our funerals, writing a memoir, abstaining, gossiping. The list is perhaps endless and because, for many at least, perhaps no thought we have or repress, relation we enter into or break off, action we take or do not take escapes these conscious and unconscious processes.

Watney weighs in on the debate about the role of HIV/AIDS in photography and other cultural practices and makes a claim against anyone who would want to "reserve" the subject of HIV/AIDS for a Fine Art tradition that is divorced from an AIDS activist aesthetic. He argues, pace Edmund White, that such a practice would somehow provide

[30] Sturken, 253

"public or private consolation for *everyone*."[31] He writes that his own personal observations have shown him that life in New York and San Francisco since the advent of the AIDS crisis "goes on very much as usual" because "gay men have learned to celebrate the achievements of the living and mourn our dead, *on the terms of our own culture*," not on the terms established by the history of Fine Art. For Watney, at some point, we have to put down our copy of *Middlemarch* and head out to the bars with the "unstated, but collective, understanding that our private griefs are matched and shared."[32] "Representing AIDS" is an argument in favor of an activist aesthetic and cultural practice, but he understands the necessity for interacting with and intervening in numerous kinds of cultural forms and practices, and writes that these "must take into account the specific circumstances determining the look and the conditions of reception of different kinds of visual imagery, generated for very different audiences."[33]

This chapter elaborates on one way of accounting for the circumstances and conditions of viewing. Engaging with *Philadelphia*, for example, is only one, small way of remaking meaning and (re)shaping cultural memory in the wake of and in response to AIDS that takes it place alongside all of the other actions. Importantly, all of these tactics express the desire to create memory or identity from the crisis "either through the mourning of the dead and the celebration of life or through the declarative marking of identity."[34]

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[31] Simon Watney, "Representing AIDS," in *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta, eds. (London: Oram Press, 1990), 166. Edmund White, "Esthetics and Loss," in *Personal Dispatches: Writers Confront AIDS*, John Preston, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990): 145-152.
[32] Watney, "Representing," 166.
[33] Watney, "Representing," 188.
[34] Sturken, 253.

As stated previously, a basic assumption in this chapter is that the appearance of HIV/AIDS in the US in the early 1980s initiated a crisis to which gay culture in the US has had to respond. Many authors have attempted to capture the significance and explain the implications of this crisis. Take, for example, a brief section from the "Canaries in the Mineshaft" chapter of Ian Young's troubling *The Stonewall Experiment: A Gay Psychohistory*, which incorporates a discussion of the protests against *Cruising* in New York City and their aftermath as a way of marking the shift. "Canaries in the Mineshaft" lays out Young's understanding of gay sexual culture in New York in the 1970s and its role in creating the sexual ideologies that he thinks fueled the AIDS crisis. I also include this here because, I believe, it highlights the ways in which this discussion is an extension of the topics addressed in the previous two chapters, the dissolution of the gay urban subject and the concept of community, which, I would argue, began prior to but were accelerated by HIV/AIDS in the US. Young recounts how, during the production of the film, the slogan "STOP *CRUISING*" began to appear spray-painted on walls throughout Greenwich Village. When the protestors "recognized the double meaning of their message," the slogans were amended to read "STOP THE MOVIE *CRUISING*."[35] "A few years later, when AIDS hit and the bodies piled up . . . the faded remnants of the original 'Stop *Cruising*' stencils could occasionally be seen, spectral messages from the past, offering ambiguous advice to any still compulsively *Cruising* sexual outlaws."[36] The Mineshaft, the New York gay sex club discussed in the previous chapter, was

[35] Ian Young, *The Stonewall Experiment: A Gay Psychohistory* (New York: Cassell, 1995), 98.
[36] Young, 98.

formerly on the fringes of radical sexual culture but now becomes, in Young's narrative, the "symbolic epicenter of the plague," a frightening "Ground Zero."[37]

This is only one representation of the lived, imagined geography of AIDS. Much of Douglas Crimp's writing is another attempt to map this experience. He also points to the shifting ground of gay identity, culture, and memory in the introduction to his *Melancholy and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*:

> All I know for sure is that feelings of loss pervaded my life. I felt overwhelming loss just walking down the streets of New York, the city that since the late 1960s had given me my sense of being really alive. This was certainly melancholia too, but unlike the melancholia that produces moralistic abjection, this was the opposite; my melancholia prevented me from acquiescing in and thus mourning the demise of a culture that had shown me the ethical alternative to conventional moralism.[38]

This rich passage sums up and begins to chart a number of the various aspects of the AIDS crisis which I must try to come to terms with in this discussion: the sense of bewilderment, uncertainty, and dread that pervaded many gay men's lives in the wake of HIV/AIDS; melancholy and mourning as features of gay culture; an awareness of the past and its relation to the present, of history, or of cultural memory; and the sense of what Foote calls "placelessness"—a "limbo of conflicting emotions" held in relation to certain sites in which the processes of bereavement have been interrupted or prevented—that haunts much of the writing about gay men, HIV/AIDS, and AIDS films.[39]

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[37] Young, 123-124.
[38] Douglas Crimp, *Melancholy and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 15.
[39] Foote, 208. For a discussion of "placelessness," see also, Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976).

David Wojnarowicz and Andrew Holleran each, in their own way, eloquently elaborate on a number of points suggested by Crimp, further sketching out a lived and imagined geography of AIDS. Wojnarowicz writes of dealing with his rage, panic, and horror during the first decade of the AIDS crisis in New York City: "It all starts with a revolving screen of memories that mixes past and present. It contains the faces and bodies of people I love struggling for life, people I loved and people who I thought would make a difference in world."[40] New York has become "fragmented spills of neon and ghostly bodies."[41] Wojnarowicz articulates the same sort of overwhelming loss as Crimp writing about the death of his friend Peter. "I felt the landscape shifting beneath my feet. . . . When I was in the street walking it didn't feel like walking. . . . I was preoccupied with the sense of disease and death in the environment."[42] "Ground Zero" is also how Holleran, like Young, describes New York City in the early 1980s because for him "the bomb seems the best metaphor" to understand what happened to the city. "The bomb fell without anyone's knowing that the bomb had fallen, which is how it destroyed a community that now seems. . .extinct."[43] Later he writes of returning to New York after moving away in 1982 and notes "I felt like the World War II veteran who returns home a stranger."[44] War metaphors such as these, according to Michael Sherry, "expressed and helped define an outlook widespread in the gay community that in turn played a

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[40] David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 104.
[41] Wojnarowicz, 39.
[42] Wojnarowicz, 227.
[43] Andrew Holleran, *Ground Zero* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc, 1988), 22.
[44] Holleran, 4.

significant role in the politics of AIDS." They "changed and sometimes skillfully publicized counterpoint to the dominant language."[45]

These various war metaphors served numerous functions, such as galvanizing individuals in the struggle against politicians and the health care and pharmaceutical industries and also expressing the growing sense of despair and horror that the AIDS epidemic had wrought. For Holleran, "the bomb," the AIDS epidemic, had turned New York, his friendships and his "homosexual life," to "rubble."[46] Similarly, Wojnarowicz writes of how the social landscape which had given him his sense of place and "comfort" is "being exploded and is disappearing. . . . Piece by piece the landscape is eroding."[47] In its place he wants to construct a monument to the dead and dying, made up of "fragments of love and hate, sadness and feelings of murder."[48] Holleran describes how even mundane tasks became desperate searches for meaning. Cleaning his bedroom was a sorting through the wreckage of his former life in search of scraps of valuable memories that may provide some kind of clue to what has happened and why. He locates an old photo of friends taken while on a summer retreat to Fire Island and realizes immediately that the most handsome man in the snapshot is now dead. He writes how "the longer I looked . . . the more extraordinary he seemed."[49] He leaves the photo out for his roommate to find. When the roommate does, he quickly discards it with the remark that he doesn't want to "look at dead people." Holleran digs the picture out of the waste can

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[45] Michael Sherry, "The Language of War in AIDS Discourse," in Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, eds. *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 42-43.
[46] Holleran, 48.
[47] Wojnarowicz, 165.
[48] Wojnarowicz, 166.
[49] Holleran, 47.

and returns it to his dusty, dismal bedroom, which he describes as his "Museum of the Past."[50]

Wojnarowicz similarly writes of how confronting such massive amounts of loss has made him a "repository of so many voices and memories and gestures of those who haven't made it."[51] These losses, and threat of more, have left him "acutely aware of myself as alive and witnessing."[52] The "New Age" is one of "many dialects," "many conditions," and is one where gay men, afraid of other gay men and of contracting HIV/AIDS, now claim only to be attracted to straight men and women, where the author can no longer tell who in the East Village is even gay, where most men in the bars simply reflect back his own mood, "bedeviled, frustrated, and cautious," when he glances at them.[53] Holleran writes at length about the past and the present, claiming at one point that "there is no clear boundary between them."[54] Not because the world around him hasn't changed significantly, but because the ghosts of the past continue to haunt the present, actively shaping the world around him. "The memory of friends is everywhere," he writes. "It pervades the city. Buildings, skylines, corners, have holes in them—gaps: missing persons. And if the present is a graveyard, the future is a minefield."[55]

Young and Holleran employ the notion of "ground zero" quite differently because their views on gay male sexual culture before the advent of AIDS are dissimilar. Young describes New York City as a sort "hot zone" of high-risk behaviors that enabled the

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[50] Holleran, 47.
[51] Wojnarowicz, 229.
[52] Wojnarowicz, 109.
[53] Wojnarowicz, 49.
[54] Holleran, 50.
[55] Holleran, 22.

spread of disease while for Holleran, it is a decimated "war zone" where people "lie broken and shattered on the ground like statues pulled down by the barbarians invading Rome."[56] Holleran's "Notes on Promiscuity" is a much more ambivalent reflection on one of the major components of urban gay male sexual cultural than Young's moralizing condemnation. Turning tricks offered hope and joy to promiscuous men but also guaranteed sadness and loneliness. It signified "perpetual adolescence" but was also a way for boys to learn how to "grow up."[57] Tricking was a "bad habit" and tricking formed character. In Holleran's account, promiscuity produced a kind of rich, paradoxical culture that encompassed the both everyday and the extraordinary, but "not anymore."[58] It was not just a sense of sexual freedom and entitlement that was lost with the coming of HIV/AIDS and the abandonment, by many, of the sexual practices that had been formed and elaborated upon throughout the previous years: it was an entire culture built upon what Crimp has called a "culture of sexual possibility."[59] For Holleran, the movie houses, baths, and clubs, at least a few of them, still existed, but they had become "pointless," because "the sexual contract, the assumptions, that gave them their meaning is gone."[60]

MOURNING AND AIDS

Both this sense of crisis, loss, confusion, and rage articulated by writers such as Holleran and Wojnarowicz and shared by many gay men who experienced the early years

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[56] Holleran, 36.
[57] Holleran, 118.
[58] Holleran, 119-120.
[59] *Crimp, Melancholia*, 140.
[60] Holleran, 22.

of the epidemic, and even those who grew up only knowing sex "in the shadow" of the epidemic, and the need to mourn the dead have been elaborated within numerous frameworks. Crimp works through the difficult relationship between grief and political activism in "Mourning and Militancy." The essay is a defense of the role of mourning and affect in gay culture in the wake of AIDS, and it is an interesting and important document in this context. It is my contention that some AIDS films provided a basis for the creation and the elaboration of meaning in a way that cannot be simply dismissed as complicitous with "dominant ideology" regarding gay men and HIV/AIDS no matter how thoroughly within that ideology those "texts themselves" may be. Much of what these critics go to great lengths to explain—their losses, their grief, their memories—complicates this view, and Crimp helps us understand why.

Social and political tensions within gay culture and psychic conflicts structuring gay subjectivity have made mourning fraught. Moreover, gay men dealing with HIV/AIDS have felt the constraints imposed upon them by a society unconcerned with and even hostile to their mourning. The public expression of grief that pervades much of the criticism of AIDS films becomes, in this context, an achievement. Crimp writes that mourning "troubles" gay men as they confront AIDS. Mourning is troubling because, on the surface, it seems inimical to activism, encourages "quietism" and capitulation. For that reason, from the perspective of many AIDS activists, he writes, "mourning is not respected; it is suspect."[61] Public grieving is also troubling for gay men during these years of the AIDS epidemic because American society actively interfered with gay men's

[61] Crimp, *Melancholia*, 132.

mourning practices in numerous ways through the "violence of silence and omission," attempting to force them hide their grief and keep their memories of the dead "private" in order that their own conception of the world not be challenged or their memories of their family members somehow compromised or sullied.[62] Crimp observes, and hopes, that if this kind of interference with the grieving process, this violence, had to be endured that it would transform mourning into militancy. Likewise, Freud's contention that successful mourning would lead to the complete severing of all ties with the lost object so that the ego would not have to suffer the same fate could, in Crimp's view, also lead to AIDS activism because, he asks, "how are we to dissociate our narcissistic satisfactions at being alive from our fight to stay alive" when the futures of all gay men are so uncertain?[63]

Crimp continues tracing Freud's discussion of mourning in order to make the point that grief is not only the expression of loss for a loved one but for "some abstraction." As mentioned previously, for Crimp, that ideal is the culture of "sexual possibility" that developed in gay urban culture. Here the notion of melancholia enters into Crimp's analysis. When mourning the loss of a culture of sexual possibility, "we incur a different order of psychic distress, since the memories of our pleasures are already fraught with ambivalence. The abject repudiation of their sexual pasts by many gay men testifies to that ambivalence."[64] One symptom of melancholia described by Freud that Crimp emphasizes here is a "predominantly moral . . . fall in self-esteem" that leads the melancholic to admonish, disparage, and chastise himself, and , moreover, to cast this

[62] Crimp, *Melancholia*, 135-137.
[63] Crimp, *Melancholia*, 137.
[64] Crimp, *Melancholia*, 140-141.

"criticism back over the past and declare that he never was any better."[65] For some gay men in the wake of AIDS, this melancholic relationship to the culture of sexual possibility produces the need to "look on our imperfectly liberated past as immature and immoral" because they have internalized, through the processes of identification and introjection, the homophobic understanding of gay male identity and sexuality as sick and depraved.[66] "Frustration, anger, rage and outrage, anxiety, fear, and terror, shame and guilt, sadness and despair—it is not surprising that we feel these things; what is surprising is that we often don't."[67] Mourning opens up the possibility for a wide range of affective experience that both the militant and melancholic responses to the AIDS epidemic would seem to want to repress, repudiate, or deny. It acknowledges the importance of the unconscious, of internal as well as external sources of conflict and suffering without falling into the trap of "moralizing self-abasement" associated with melancholia. At the same time, mourning leaves open the possibility for a much-needed militancy.

"BEARING WITNESS" AS TACTIC FOR SURVIVAL

Authors such as Steven Schwartzberg and Walt Odets have addressed some of the psychological dimensions of the AIDS crisis for both HIV-positive and HIV-negative men. The AIDS crisis for Schwartzberg initiates what he refers to as a "crisis of meaning": "AIDS has obliterated many people's prior beliefs of the world as meaningful. In its enormity, intensity, and relentlessness, AIDS cuts to the very heart of

[65] Crimp, *Melancholia*, 141.
[66] Crimp, *Melancholia*, 144..
[67] Crimp, *Melancholia*, 146.

how people find meaning in life, of how to understand the world and our place in it."[68] The author's task, as he sees it, is to chart the ways in which gay men, particularly HIV-positive gay men, develop strategies for psychically adapting to a "world of grief." "Gay culture, as a whole, is engaged in an ongoing and continual process of bereavement."[69] For some, the losses are too great and they experience what Schwartzberg refers to as "rupture." "With its relentless barrage of illness, loss, and grief, AIDS has the devastating power to shatter people's views of life as meaningful."[70] Disbelieving, disillusioned, these are the men for whom there is no meaningful life after AIDS. All that life is purported to offer them and what once could be taken for granted—relative safety, a sense of belonging, order, longevity, prosperity, happiness, gratification, etc.—is gone, and nothing is able to provide them with the same sense of meaningfulness that life once had.

Only *some* experience rupture as a permanent state; for Schwartzberg, rupture is only one of a number of responses to the epidemic. Other men find ways of coping and continuing to grow. These men have invented "styles of adaptation" that allow for living with uncertainty, ambiguity, suffering, grief, and an awareness of their own mortality in ways that enable them to reconstruct the world as meaningful. Part of the on-going struggle against AIDS according to Schwartzberg for gay men as "shared witnesses and bearers of so much loss" is to find "ways to express the pain, the grief, the despair that feels increasingly out of our scope" and to do so repeatedly and collectively.[71]

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[68] Schwartzberg , 4.
[69] Schwartzberg , 31.
[70] Schwartzberg , 101.
[71] Schwartzberg , 219.

For Odets the AIDS epidemic forced gay men in the US on "a sad and lonely expedition into deep space" for which there is no map.[72] His controversial hypothesis is that the AIDS epidemic has, likely permanently and irrevocably, altered the psychic lives of HIV-negative men. He writes, "being gay and being uninfected is *now a condition*, not the absence of one."[73] Perhaps the greatest challenge posed to HIV-negative men, although certainly not to them alone, is how to cope with massive personal loss.

> The first decade of the epidemic alone has made it certain that all gay men now live—or will live—with loss that is unimaginable to most Americans. The relentlessness of this loss raises doubt about what form of psychological and interpersonal life will be possible for those gay men who do not succumb to AIDS itself. For some, the losses of the epidemic will surely make even physical survival impossible.[74]

"Normal" understandings of the grief process, when dealing with the catastrophic losses some gay men have had to contend with over the last two decades, no longer apply. Odets believes that the "question of how much repeated loss a man can bear and still process the experience in a psychologically meaningful way" simply cannot be answered using pre-HIV/AIDS era models for understanding grief.[75] He writes that the worst possible future for gay men is one of "meaninglessness rooted in our inability to adequately bear witness to the epidemic *now*."[76] For him, the acts of bearing witness, articulating in order to clarify and understand the significance of shared experiences and events, are the ways in which meaningfulness can be achieved. Writing, AIDS

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[72] Walt Odets, *In The Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995), 13.
[73] Odets, 13; emphasis in original.
[74] Odets, 63.
[75] Odets, 91.
[76] Odets, 269.

education, and psychological groups can help individuals "bear witness" to their own experiences and feel connected to the world around them. Collectively, these acts of bearing witness allow us to "sustain or reinstate a sense of meaning in our lives by finding lives in other kinds of survival."[77]

It is as a kind of "bearing witness" to the epidemic that testimonial writing can be situated. Timothy Murphy has pointed out grief and mourning "are not . . . psychological states serving cathartic resolution of pain and anguish," and they are not "driven by a desire to overcome death, but to prevent it from eroding the meaningfulness of life."[78] Such writing serves numerous functions such as creating a record of the dead, making sense of unexpected experiences of illness and death, and voicing protest against an uncaring world.[79] Testimonial writing offers those suffering from the pain of grief a means to heal, "not an inconsequential good," but most writing of this kind reaches beyond the solely personal. Although testimonial writers "may begin with private grief, many of them consciously aim beyond the limits of personal anguish and in articulating the need for the conquest of the epidemic, do not mistake profound sorrow as any substitute for education and social action."[80] Murphy places testimonial writing on a moral and political continuum that stretches from mourning to AIDS activism, and while

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[77] Odets, 279.
[78] Timothy F. Murphy, "Testimony," in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, eds. (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 316.
[79] Murphy, 317.
[80] Murphy, 311.

its usefulness in relation to overt kinds of political engagement is difficult to show, it is not "worthwhile only in so far as it advances a political or medical reformation."[81]

The AIDS elegies, too, of poets such as Thom Gunn, Essex Hemphill, Wayne Koestenbaum, Michael Lynch, and Paul Monette can be understood as this type of testimony. AIDS elegies are, for Melissa Zeiger, important attempts to "write the dead—and the circumstances of their death—into the cultural narrative."[82] Zeiger has shown how the flood of AIDS elegies by gay men has been central to the "discursive refigurations" occurring in the wake of HIV/AIDS.[83] AIDS elegies written since the mid-1980s are certainly politically informed. In fact, Zeiger goes as far as to claim that at least some AIDS elegies can be called "agitprop." As such, they are as much about contesting the social, political, medical, and cultural constructions of AIDS as they are about mourning the loss of loved ones. That is, they evidence both a politics and a poetics that together perform certain cultural work: memorializing and conserving the dead as "ghostly presences," refusing the consolations of traditional elegy (and mourning), articulating a sense of obligation to the dead, and enlisting pleasure in the service of politics. For Zeiger, "elegiac consciousness" is the dominant mode of thinking and feeling for gay men in the wake of AIDS: "AIDS is so central a fact in contemporary gay consciousness that almost any poem written now by a gay man, no matter what its

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[81] Murphy, 307. For other useful approaches to understanding testimony, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[82] Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithica: Cornell UP, 1997), 127. Different approaches to understanding elegy gay male mourning can be found in George E Haggerty, "Love and Loss: An Elegy," *GLQ* 10.3 (2004) 385-405 and Michael Moon, "Memorial Rags," in *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman, eds. (New York: MLA of America, 1995): 233-240.

[83] Zeiger, 21.

topic, is likely to have elegiac moments."[84] I will continue the discussion of the "welcome return of the dead" and other motifs of AIDS elegies and the broader category of testimonial writing about HIV/AIDS below and discuss if and how these motifs recur in AIDS films and their critical reception.[85]

Schwartzberg writes that it is both dangerous and misleading to draw a sharp distinction between gay men who are HIV-negative and HIV-positive as Odets has done. Part of the danger stems from the fact that HIV status is the result of "what we do" and not "who we are," and by drawing such a sharp distinction, we encourage those who happen to be negative to treat their status as an abiding "personality trait," thus potentially putting them at risk for future infection.[86] To do so also risks reifying further divisions among the gay male population. HIV-positive gay men are at continual risk of being further marginalized and shunned. José Esteban Muñoz is equally concerned about the "residual effects" of sharpening the distinction between HIV-positive and HIV-negative gay men. He is troubled by attempts to do away with collective identification altogether. Therefore, he focuses his project of delineating a "queer utopian memory" on the "attempt to decipher the networks of commonality and the structures of feeling that link queers across different identity markers, including positive and negative anti-body status."[87] "Remembrances," he writes, "and their ritualized retellings . . . [have] worldmaking potentialities."[88] "Utopia" is a significant concept for Muñoz because it

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[84] Zeiger, 109.
[85] Zeiger, 108.
[86] Schwartzberg, 220.
[87] José Esteban Muñoz, "Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories," in *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, Dangerous Bedfellows, eds. (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 370.
[88] Muñoz, 357.

works to "imagine a space outside of heteronormativity" that is free of the constraints of HIV/AIDS and "offers a critique of the present, of *what is*, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be.*"[89]. These images of what "perhaps will be" are the traces of a queer "utopian longing" that I would like to explore further in relation to the audiences of AIDS films.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO WATCHING AIDS FILMS

The most extensive examination of AIDS films thus far has been Hart's *The AIDS Movie*, which needs to be discussed at length here. Eva Cherniavsky's "Real Again: Melodrama and the Subject of HIV/AIDS" is an interesting attempt to construct the spectator of AIDS films psychoanalytically. Both authors attempt to get at the issue of how viewers watch and interpret AIDS films in ways that differ from my own, and this section explores each approach and where they diverge. Paula Treichler's "AIDS Narratives" also looks at AIDS films and ideology but attempts more clearly to theorize the reception context in a way that accounts for the borrower's unique social position and subjectivity. Her work is also discussed in this section.

Hart organizes his study of AIDS films and their viewers around several analytic concerns. The first concern is with the "cinematic tradition of otherness"—particularly in genres such as science fiction and the melodrama, the two genres with which the author argues AIDS films are explicitly connected—and how these traditions come to bear on AIDS films. Hart then explores the politics of victim blaming and the "othering" of gay men in AIDS films. His next concern is with the role of the city and the deployment of

[89] Muñoz, 357; emphasis in original.

the city/country dichotomy in the films he is analyzing. Finally, he looks at the role of AIDS and "AIDS characters" in non-AIDS films such as "metaphor films" and documentaries about HIV/AIDS. The two concerns I want to emphasize here, because they overlap with my own, are his discussions of melodrama in relation to AIDS films and his analysis of urban spaces in AIDS films. While Hart offers numerous key insights into AIDS films, it is important also to discuss the book's shortcomings. Ultimately, because he makes numerous problematic assumptions about the audience and the cultural work of AIDS films and because he seems to make an implicit case for a discourse on HIV/AIDS in which gay men and their troubled history with the epidemic are conspicuously absent, its usefulness to my project is limited.

Hart "analyzes American movies released in the first two decades of the epidemic and theorizes about the likely social ramifications of their various representations of AIDS and people with AIDS."[90] He examines the manifest content of thirty-two AIDS films using both social-scientific content analysis and "humanistic" textual analysis in order to discuss how these representations shape and are shaped by the culture which produces them. For Hart, media texts are forms of "social action" that create and circulate cultural meanings that have "real" and identifiable social effects. They "provide ideological guidance," "mold a society's cultural relationship to the AIDS pandemic," and influence the "pandemic's present and future realities."[91]

According to Hart, more often than not, AIDS films serve two primary social functions. First, they perpetuate homophobia and heterosexism and "contribute to a

[90] Hart, 3.
[91] Hart, 8.

world in which differences in sexual orientation are devalued."[92] For example, gay men in AIDS films, according to Hart are typically shown to be disappointments to their families. They are, in fact, the "enemies" of the family and, as such, must be eradicated so that the institution of the family and all that it represents in patriarchal culture can be restored to a harmonious state. If the "sanctity" of the family often goes unquestioned in AIDS films, thus reinforcing heterosexism, continually portraying gay men as "sexually promiscuous individuals who irresponsibly put others at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS" reinforces homophobic conceptualizations of gay men, and such "negative representations" lead to an increase in intolerance of gay men.[93] AIDS films, also, according to Hart, typically handle the issue of gay male sexuality with much restraint. This has two effects. First, it implicitly acknowledges the superiority of heterosexuality by not representing the "full range of choices in homosexual expression." Second, drawing on the work of Frank Pilipp and Charles Shull, Hart claims that it demonstrates how AIDS films "only minimally focus on the pandemic as it is experienced by gay men, with modes of contraction and prevention only rarely being addressed and sex between men never being discussed."[94]

The second social function of AIDS films is to conceal the "true" nature of the pandemic and those who have and may be affected. For example, AIDS films offer heterosexual viewers the illusion of safety from the virus by continuing to link HIV/AIDS almost exclusively to gay men or other "deviant" identities such as

[92] Hart, 32.
[93] Hart, 52-53.
[94] Hart, 53.

intravenous drug users; this, in turn, works to inhibit preventative behaviors in populations not historically viewed as "high risk" groups. At other times, when the films do acknowledge HIV/AIDS in heterosexuals, they reinforce the notion of a "victim continuum" that places them, more often than not, on the innocent end of the spectrum, implicitly reinforcing the notion that gays and intravenous drug users are the guilty victims for whom HIV infection is a much-deserved punishment.[95] The films work to conceal that HIV/AIDS is not an issue facing urban populations exclusively by denying its geographic reach into suburban and rural areas in the US.[96] They deny the disastrous effects of HIV/AIDS among minority and working-class populations by frequently making it an issue faced by middle-class whites, depriving "such individuals of essential information they need regarding the actual extent of their HIV/AIDS risk."[97]

Hart's concern is with AIDS films as genre, one that shares certain features of science fiction and melodrama, yet is distinct in its form and content from both. As a genre study, Hart focuses on the "representational trends and cumulative messages" of AIDS films, often at the expense of the specificity of individual films.[98] For example, for Hart, AIDS films by definition, present the viewer with the threat of the end of "life as we know it," much like science fiction films, due to a disaster which science cannot understand or control. They also share with melodrama—or more specifically, the women's films of the 1930s and 1940s—a concern with restoring patriarchal order through the elimination of "deviant" others. Melodramas are, for Hart a "somewhat

[95] Hart, 40.
[96] Hart, 80.
[97] Hart, 63-64.
[98] Hart, 57.

repressive type of movie" that "strive[s] . . . to marginalize any resistance to dominant ideologies" and in which issues of identity are treated morally and affectively by "appealing to the viewer's emotions rather than to his or her intellect."[99] Because AIDS films continually link HIV/AIDS to gay men, it is most often the gay man who must be eradicated so that patriarchal order can be restored and that "life as we know it" can be rescued from ruin. At the level of genre, "life as we know it" is defined by Hart as, "human civilization" uncontested patriarchal social order, an "ideal time of respectability that lacks antisocial and/or immoral behavior."[100]

Hart sees a nostalgia for a less complicated, more harmonious time at work in melodrama and in AIDS films, and, repeatedly, that nostalgia is put into service of a patriarchal social order, its values, and the repression and elimination of otherness. The end result is that "gay men are represented as the primary other who must be sacrificed to restore patriarchal social order that existed prior to the discovery of HIV/AIDS; they are sexually promiscuous 'enemies' of both the family and the larger society."[101]

He offers several examples of films within the genre that seem to support such an interpretation: *Our Sons* (1991), *It's My Party* (1996), and *One Night Stand* (1997). One could arguably add *Philadelphia* to the list. While Andrew Beckett's family is supportive, accepting, and loving, his "homosexuality" can be understood as a transgression against patriarchal/familial values, a transgression that results, ultimately, in his own death. *Philadelphia* does seem nostalgic for an ideal past before sexual identity

[99] Hart, 31.
[100] Hart, 31.
[101] Hart, 31.

takes hold and corrupts Andrew in its presentation. In the final moments of the film, after Andrew has died, home movie images show him as a young, "presexual" boy. Here, the film returns Andrew to the protective enclosure of the family and bestows upon him an unadulterated innocence that as an adult he had lost.

Other AIDS films, however, seem less intent on upholding the sanctity of the family and of patriarchal social order than these examples. As the characters in *Longtime Companion* share the news of a *New York Times* report of "strange illnesses" that have been found in gay men in New York and Los Angeles in the opening of the film, the viewer becomes increasingly aware that "life as we know it" has been destroyed. Is this the same "life" that is destroyed by HIV/AIDS in *Philadelphia*? Is the viewer of *Longtime Companion* urged to feel nostalgic for an "ideal past of respectability" before the onset of "immoral and/or deviant behavior"? An ideal past does seem to be at work in the film; it is not, however, the same "past" as presented in *Philadelphia* through Andrew's childhood. In the final moments of *Longtime Companion* as the three surviving characters of the film stroll on the beach of Fire Island discussing the possibility of the end of the epidemic, the friends and lovers they have lost join them for a impromptu party. The characters mill about, long lost friends greet one another and share hugs and kisses, they dance and drink. By bringing the characters lost to HIV/AIDS back from the dead, as it were, by returning to the film's, and in some ways the epidemic's, "ground zero," and reuniting them with their friends who struggle to find meaning in all of the suffering and death and who long for an end to the epidemic, the film does not seem to be suggesting that their elimination from the narrative was inherently justifiable in the name of patriarchal social order. Rather, if we are to interpret *Longtime*

Companion using Hart's contention that AIDS films are concerned with the restoration of social order through the eradication of all disruptive elements, the ending of the film seems to suggest that the HIV virus "itself"—not those it has infected—along with fear, hatred, and ignorance must be eliminated so that the vibrant culture of the past can reemerge.

Similarly, the one character with HIV in *Parting Glances* is Nick. Unlike the gay, HIV-positive characters of *Philadelphia* or *Longtime Companion*, Nick does not die in the course of the film. He and his former lover, Michael, spend a portion of the narrative preparing for and coming to terms with his impending death, but he is alive and present in the film until the end. Michael's current lover, Robert, is leaving for Africa, and the film makes it clear that he is leaving because he does not want to have to deal with Nick's death and the devastating effect it will have on Michael; he cannot cope with his own fears of HIV/AIDS and the jealousy he feels in knowing that Nick is Michael's "true love." At the last minute, after Michael returns to the apartment he shares with Robert from "saving" Nick from a suicide attempt, which was actually only a prank, Robert returns home and tells Michael that he wants to stay. As Robert is able to put aside his jealousy and his fear, the couple is restored, and Nick and Robert are both integrated back into the social order represented in the film, one that, like *Longtime Companion*, has little to do with family in the traditional sense. Again the disruptive social element would appear to be AIDS phobia and not those infected with the virus.

Defining AIDS films from the outset as a "repressive type of film" that, in all of its variations, works to uphold and eliminate opposition to patriarchal social order and the family through the threat of the end of "life as we know it" introduces a "guilty other"

who must be punished and then eradicated. Hart's definition can potentially blind us to the ways in which certain films within the group explicitly encourage viewers to think beyond these constraints.

Hart's ideological critique of AIDS films is also implicitly an argument in favor of "positive images." As such, it falls into a number of familiar traps given that practically any image in one context or another for some viewers is bound to be viewed as "positive." "Positive" carries with it implicit notions of what is worthwhile and valuable. What does "positive image" for Hart mean in the context of AIDS films? If a gay man must be represented in AIDS films, and below I will argue that Hart's analysis calls for the complete separation of AIDS discourse from gay men, then it is best always to show them as lovers in "committed, monogamous relationships."[102]

Take, for example, Hart's discussion of Greg Araki's *The Living End* (1992). Hart identifies the film as one of several "noteworthy" AIDS films created under the influence of "gay directors and targeted largely to gay male viewers" that is more "daring and uninhibited" in its representation of "gay male intimacy and sexual activity."[103] Elsewhere, however, the film is sharply criticized for reinforcing the notion that gay men are "sexually promiscuous individuals who irresponsibly put others at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS." Hart's concern is with the character Nick, "a handsome and HIV-positive drifter" who "engages in kinky sex with one man who picked him up while hitchhiking and then seduces another man a few hours later."[104]

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[102] Hart, 56.
[103] Hart, 56-57.
[104] Hart, 52.

The Living End is, in many ways, an outlaw, fantasy film. It is about two young men who find out that they are HIV positive and take a road trip in an attempt to escape the constraints imposed on them by the virus and society. It is as much a darkly humorous examination of teenage angst, nihilism, and self-destruction as it is a condemnation of the current climate of repression, and Nick's behavior has to be understood in that context.

The Living End, in Hart's analysis, is also problematic for the ways in which it perpetuates the notion of a "victim continuum" in relation to HIV/AIDS. Hart describes how a "homophobic shopper" in *The Living End* "explains that, contrary to popular belief, the acronym AIDS stands for 'Adios, Infected Dick-Suckers'" and declares that dialogue such as this "efficiently perpetuates the us-versus-them dichotomy with regard to 'innocent' and 'guilty' people with AIDS."[105] Yet what are we to make of the fact that the guy who insults Nick and Jon is a neo-Nazi in a t-shirt with a picture of a pig on the front whom Nick assaults off-screen for insulting them? Similarly, Hart writes that a scene from *Parting Glances*, in which Nick feels compelled to explain that just because he may have had casual sex in the past his father should not think that contracting AIDS was his fault, has the same effect of perpetuating the notion of a "victim continuum." It would seem that these scenes, while acknowledging such a continuum, actively contest it and question its validity. It seems unlikely, then, that these scenes do actually reinforce the idea that gay men with AIDS are "guilty victims" in any simple way. Rather, the scenes at least open up the issue for discussion and debate by offering a different view.

[105] Hart, 40-41.

Hart's implicit interest is in how the "non-gay" and presumably HIV-negative viewer watches AIDS films. This accounts for his concern with "positive," unambiguous images of gay men and gay male sexuality, but it also leads him to ignore the ways in which the films may, in fact, address the issue of the pandemic as it has been experienced by gay men and how these films can be used in ways that run counter to the ideal social functions to which Hart assigns to them. Hart's interest in non-gay viewers drives his research and influences his understanding of what AIDS films should, as forms of social action, "do." They should correctly influence perceptions of HIV/AIDS and those affected by the epidemic and also inform individuals of their own risk of infection and the possibilities of prevention. He draws on the research of social psychologist Michael Slater in order to make the point that fictional, narrative films may have more of an influence on the images and beliefs viewers hold about particular social groups "that are relatively unfamiliar to audience members than non-fiction films."[106] Similarly, he points to the work of media scholar Larry Gross to show that media representations of groups of people can help cultivate images of people and phenomena "about which viewers have little knowledge."[107] Clearly, the viewer theorized here is one who has had little or no interaction with gay men nor any first-hand experience with HIV/AIDS.

In the process of communicating information about the AIDS epidemic to viewers, AIDS films "open up, encourage, and attempt to close down certain audience member decodings."[108] In the end, according to Hart, "it [is] unlikely that the majority of

[106] Hart, 13.
[107] Hart, 13.
[108] Hart, 13.

receivers will be able to interpret most mediated texts significantly differently from the way that they are intended by their senders" because the sender and the recipient of the "message" share the same set of representational codes and conventions.[109] This assertion about interpretation is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it assumes homogeneity among senders and receivers and between receivers that certainly does not exist in "reality." Recall what is implied in the threat in AIDS films to the end of "life as we know it." "Life" here is synonymous with heterosexuality, the sanctity of the family, monogamy, respectability. How might one's understanding of "life" differ if one were interpolated within society and by the text differently? I have tried to suggest already that no single interpretation could satisfy all viewers.

Second, Hart's assertion assumes that we can know the intentions of the senders of such messages. Hart repeatedly insists that AIDS films perpetuate homophobia and heterosexism by showing the ways in which gay men deserve to be infected with HIV as punishment for their "deviance" and the inherent superiority of heterosexuality. Is that truly the intention of each of these filmmakers? I do not receive that impression when I read what the filmmakers themselves have to say. Independent film pioneer, John Pierson, writes of his deep respect and affection for those involved in the production of *Parting Glances* who have since died of AIDS-related causes, including writer-director Bill Sherwood who passed away in 1990.[110] Craig Lucas reflects back on the making of *Longtime Companion*, learning that Norman Rene was HIV-positive as shooting was to

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[109] Hart, 7.

[110] John Pierson with Kevin Smith, *Spike, Mike, Slackers, and Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 42-43.

begin, thinking about how one actor tried to hide his KS lesions from the camera while another had to have them made-up, and dealing with the death of a friend who was one of the actors cast in a central role. His intentions in making the movie are clear, "I remember thinking that I was not going to let anyone ever forget any of it."[111] Ron Nyswaner reveals that the script for *Philadelphia* was born out of the grief he felt when a relative was diagnosed with AIDS.[112]

Third, Hart's approach assumes a kind of hegemony that could never be as complete as it is represented here. Viewers would not seem to question anything that an AIDS film tries to communicate to them—no matter how ideologically suspect or distasteful, no matter how reactionary or harmful. Viewers accept AIDS films at face value as merely reflections of "reality," unaware of the constructed nature of films about AIDS (let alone the "constructedness" of HIV/AIDS), incorporate messages into their worldviews, and uncritically act on them accordingly.

Ultimately, Hart claims AIDS films have failed in disseminating effective information about HIV/AIDS to their audiences because they cannot provide adequate "homophily" between the viewer and the main characters, those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, because they continue to link HIV/AIDS to gay men. That is, the difference that "homosexuality" introduces into the narrative is too great to allow for the identification of non-gay viewers with gay HIV-positive characters, and, without the necessary "homophily" (defined as the "degree to which characters are similar to the viewers"), AIDS films have "deflected attention away from the realities of the worldwide

[111] Craig Lucas, "Justifying Our Love: *Longtime Companion*," *The Advocate* 12 Nov 2002: 87.
[112] Ron Nyswaner, "Leaving *Philadelphia*," *The Advocate* 27 May 2003: 36.

pandemic, in which AIDS is overwhelmingly the result of heterosexual sexual transmission."[113] Hart occasionally relies on theorists who argue that a viewer can potentially learn much information about people and phenomena with which he or she has no personal relation or experience, but in the end, he concludes that without this "homophily" the chance that a viewer comes to think of the text as credible and relevant to his or her experience is not likely. Therefore, AIDS films reduce the "salience" of HIV/AIDS for the "millions of other Americans who are also at risk and inhibits preventative behaviors."[114]

In the end, Hart implicitly endorses a discourse on AIDS from which gay men have been eradicated. Given the construction of the epidemic as the "gay plague" early on and the tenacity of the belief that HIV/AIDS is a "gay disease," this is perhaps understandable. The goal for AIDS films in relation to gay men should be to "alter and expand the commonly accepted ways in which non-gays perceive and discuss the status of gay men and their lived realities in American society."[115] Even the most "positive representations," however, of gay men within AIDS films ask viewers to make the link between AIDS and gay men, a link which has contributed to a "new generation of homophobia," harassment, and violence.[116] To have HIV/AIDS and to be gay in an AIDS film only reproduces the notion of "guilty" AIDS victims.

There seems to be no room in AIDS films for the representation of gay males or even "gayness" in Hart's analysis. For example, he argues that images of gay men as

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[113] Hart, 59.
[114] Hart, 60.
[115] Hart, 57.
[116] Hart, 57.

caretakers, a traditionally female role, only serve to confirm the homophobic stereotype of gay men as not men and, moreover, continue to implicate gay men in the discourse on HIV/AIDS.[117] RuPaul's presence in *A Mother's Prayer* (1995), for example, unwittingly reinforces the link between gay men and HIV/AIDS when his character befriends and nurtures a heterosexual woman who is HIV-positive. The author also criticizes the film for allowing several scenes to play out at New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis offices because that, too, implicates gay men in the discourse on HIV/AIDS. It would seem that there is no room for gay AIDS activists and advocates. The author even sees as "shortcomings" the interrogation of the link between HIV/AIDS and gay men in AIDS films such as *The Ryan White Story* (1989) and *Something to Live For: The Alison Gertz Story* (1992), in which the main characters unjustly suffer the affects of homophobia because others assume that they are "homosexuals."[118] In Hart's analysis, the scenes in which homophobic epithets are hurled at the main characters of these films, for example, are symptomatic of both the homophobia of the filmmakers and the inability to resist the temptation of presenting HIV/AIDS in relation to gay men, thus oversimplifiying the "realities" of the epidemic and suggesting that AIDS is a "gay disease." Somehow, even the presence of the lesbian character, Jane, played by Whoopi Goldberg, in *Boys on the Side* (1994) is suspect because her lesbian desire "repeatedly bring[s] homosexuality and 'gayness' to mind."[119] In Hart's analysis, the link between gay men and HIV/AIDS

[117] Hart, 57.
[118] Hart, 63.
[119] Hart, 61.

obscures the "true" nature of the AIDS epidemic. For that reason, the author seems to abandon the AIDS movie as a significant site for rethinking HIV/AIDS.

Because Hart's approach to AIDS films only concerns itself with non-gay viewers and because the author cannot find the ways in which AIDS films work against dominant modes of conceptualizing HIV/AIDS, his approach is only marginally useful to the present project, which holds that for gay men, AIDS films have offered an important way to make sense of their own and others' experiences, histories, and identities. Hart views AIDS films almost entirely as a means of information dissemination. It is not surprising, therefore, that he is suspicious of the tendency within AIDS films to present the issue in a melodramatic mode, appealing to a viewer's emotions. What I have tried to outline in the previous section of this chapter are some of the affective dimensions of the epidemic, and the viewers of AIDS films have consistently looked for ways to relate these films to their own affective experiences of HIV/AIDS.

Eva Cherniavsky's "Real Again: Melodrama and the Subject of HIV/AIDS" is concerned with AIDS melodrama's "affective pursuit of grounded meaning" not because the appeal is an affective one, but because, she argues, affect is harnessed to patriarchal, heterosexist norms, melodrama's "moral agenda," and its "will to purity."[120] Her objective is, in part, to identify the ways in which affect might be redirected against these outcomes in ways that could produce "counterpossibilities" and more "contingent and promiscuous futures."[121]

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[120] "Will to purity" is a phrase used by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker in their "Scenes from the Last Sex," *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1993).
[121] Eva Cherniavsky, "Real Again: Melodrama and the Subject of HIV/AIDS," *GLQ* 4:3 (1998): 393.

Cherniavsky's analysis is, like Hart's, an ideological one, though the author makes clear that she is most interested in finding the cracks in the moral agenda of melodrama by pointing to its inconsistencies and incoherences. Cherniavsky's approach to AIDS films differs from Hart's in that she wants to exploit the ways in which the conventions of melodrama "are not always wholly adequate to the disciplinary agendas they serve."[122] Thus, for example, the finale of *Philadelphia*, in its enlistment of the many children who populate Andrew's wake scene, links his death to a "reproductive imperative so that the gay son's loss seems to engender generational continuity."[123] At the same time, however, perhaps the most discussed scene of *Philadelphia* in which Andrew translates Maria Callas's aria from *Andrea Chenier* for Joe's benefit while it plays on the stereo in his apartment, "gestures unexpectedly and powerfully beyond the gendered binaries" that the rest of the film works toward and stages a "demand for community and recognition," thereby broaching a "new and more hopeful spectrum of melodramatic effect."[124] Cherniavsky's approach to AIDS films focuses on melodramatic "excess," those contradictory moments in the film or television program that cannot be contained by the unifying elements of the text. Here she finds the redeeming aspects of AIDS melodrama, the fleeting moments in which the contrary meaning produced potentially unravels the text in its entirety.

Her argument is that AIDS melodramas position the HIV-positive gay male character in a traditionally feminine position, that of the mother in melodrama who is

[122] Cherniavsky, 379
[123] Cherniavsky, 390.
[124] Cherniavsky, 397.

terminally ill, dying, or somehow "otherwise extinguished as a subject."[125] In those moments when this relegation of the subject of HIV/AIDS to the domain of traditional heteronormative femininity fails, a "potential mutation in melodrama's narrative economy" is produced that allows for the redirection of affect away from melodrama's "investment in origins" and toward the "possibility of a nonreproductive sociality."[126] In conventional melodramas, the working through of the mother's death compels the child characters to take up normative gender roles; girls accept motherhood for themselves and boys learn to become men by overcoming the loss. In all of this, the mother herself is not a subject, but fantasy of wholeness or completion, "a body effectively anchored (mired) in the zone of originary non-being" which must necessarily be excluded from the realm of "meaningful existence."[127] Mothers in conventional melodramas and HIV-positive gay men in AIDS melodramas are both serving a "biological sentence to the real," and as non-subjects, non-beings, "densely evocative absences," they solicit "our" sense of lost origins, they represent the impossible promise of "undifferentiated and unsignifiable plentitude lost to a differential order of meaning."[128] Since, however, according to Cherniavsky, there can be only two positions in the narrative and familial economies of melodrama, the "pre-textual" or female "nonsubject replete with *life*" and the textual or male "subject *deferring death*," the gay male subject of HIV/AIDS overtaxes the narrative, as he is presented as both being/nonbeing, active/passive, living/presumed

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[125] Cherniavsky, 384
[126] Cherniavsky, 377.
[127] Cherniavsky, 386-387.
[128] Here the author is building on the work of Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (Summer 1991): 2-13.

dead. This position of nonbeing, of standing in for the "real," is anomalous, she suggests, "*for the male subject.*"[129] To return again to the example of *Philadelphia*, in the final scene Andrew's death is put into the service of generational continuity and heterosexual reproduction which seem to demand his eradication, yet the "aria scene" points to the compatibility of HIV-positive persons and "life," "individual lives but also 'life' as such, the life of a communal body, of a nation."[130] Here, the film gestures beyond the "intimate sphere" of heterosexual reproduction and, in so doing, moves melodrama and the subject of HIV/AIDS out of the private sphere and into the public domain. Rather than successfully domesticating the subject of HIV/AIDS, HIV/AIDS proves to be only partially assimilable and forces melodrama to succumb to its own contradictions.

Cherniavsky's analysis focuses on what she calls the "heterosexual AIDS melodrama," those in which the stakes of HIV/AIDS are most clearly articulated within a familial, domestic context. The "losses incurred by AIDS belong to the American nuclear family rather than to gay men specifically or to the AIDS activist community more generally."[131] In the heterosexual AIDS melodrama, such as *Philadelphia*, the "pre-text" is always familial, but in the "homosexual AIDS melodrama," the pre-text is typically some idealized notion of gay community. In each variation, the film begins with a break in time, each "begins where its imagined pre-text ends." In the heterosexual AIDS melodrama, HIV/AIDS disrupts the nuclear family, but in the homosexual AIDS melodrama, HIV/AIDS is staged as a "crisis in the gay male community."[132] "Life as we

[129] Cherniavsky, 384.
[130] Cherniavsky, 397.
[131] Cherniavsky, 382.
[132] Cherniavsky, 382.

know it," to use Hart's phrase, in *Longtime Companion*, for example, is not linked to the nuclear family but to "an affluent gay male community in post-Stonewall New York and on Fire Island," both of which are presented as edenic and, ultimately, ravaged by the advent of HIV/AIDS.[133] In such films, as in much of gay male literature on HIV/AIDS of which Holleran was previously used as an example, "HIV and AIDS become symptomatic of an ungrounding, a loss of referentiality, negotiated through affective investment in the lost world."[134] It is this affective investment in the "lost world" that Cherniavsky finds troubling about the "homosexual" AIDS melodrama. Such a strategy, according to the author, encourages a "nostalgia" for a "lost communal plentitude" that "displaces strategies for survival."[135] If the heterosexual AIDS melodrama can "serve an activist agenda" and thus be redeemed for its inadvertent reinvestment of affect in a non-reproductive sociality, Cherniavsky sees little possibility for a similar potential in "homosexual" AIDS melodramas such as *Longtime Companion*, or at least chooses not to explore that possibility.[136]

Cherniavsky's approach to AIDS melodrama has much explanatory value. In particular, her observation regarding the different narrative strategies of homosexual and heterosexual melodramas is quite useful. Among other things, it serves as a corrective to Hart's over-generalization by recognizing differences within the category of AIDS film. Cherniavsky's understanding of how ideology operates through motion pictures is also more nuanced than Hart's, linking as it does affect and the unconscious to ideology.

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[133] Cherniavsky, 383.
[134] Cherniavsky, 383.
[135] Cherniavsky, 383.
[136] Cherniavsky, 395.

Rather than asserting that AIDS films distort the nature of the AIDS pandemic by providing the wrong information and suggesting we simply need more accurate representations of the epidemic, she attempts to show how representations of the epidemic are grafted on to the very mechanisms by which the social subject takes shape, and, importantly, pointing to the ways in which that process can potentially fail, all the while remaining attentive to the affective dimensions of ideology.

Here, though, is also where the argument becomes problematic. The spectator of AIDS melodramas in Cherniavsky's analysis is simply a product of the text, one who is encouraged to take up the "proper" sexual/social position by working through the psychic/social conflicts posed by the "mother plot" staged by the film. The end result, for both melodrama and the subject, is a normative heterosexual masculinity or femininity constructed in opposition to the subject of HIV/AIDS as stand-in for the figure of mother. It is important to reiterate that such "text-activated theories" neglect the fact that, in Jackie Byars's words, the "social subject and the discursive subject" are "overlapping but not entirely congruent phenomena."[137] If we are still to accept the author's "text-activated" approach to understanding AIDS melodramas, however, it is necessary to consider how Cherniavsky's reading of melodrama through Freud's discussion of the "fort/da" game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* possibly incorporates some of the more problematic aspects of psychoanalytic theory.

The fort/da game for Freud is an example of the ways in which a child can learn to overcome traumatic events through staging their repetition. In Freud's recounting, his

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[137] Jackie Byars, *All that Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1991), 35.

grandson throws a wooden spool of string away, out of his sight, exclaiming "fort" ("gone") and is eventually observed reeling it back in and declaring "da" ("there"). Each time the child repeats the game, Freud speculates that he is attempting to "compensate" himself for his mother's departure. If that is an event over which he has no control, or in which he plays a passive role, the game allows him to take up an active and perhaps even defiant relationship in respect the mother's disappearance. The game of fort/da testifies to the operation of the pleasure principle as a manifestation of the impulse to "work over in the mind some overpowering experience so as to make oneself master of it."[138] Melodrama, too, is understood as such a willed restaging of trauma by Cherniavsky, hence her interest with "lost origins" in melodrama, their gendering, and the drive to work through the loss and take up an gendered identity.

Freud associates the subject's origin with death, and claims that "the aim of all life is death," and states death is not something "new," but a return to the inanimate state that preceded life. Cherniavsky links this original state to the body of the mother, although Freud does not develop this argument himself.[139] He does, however, discuss how adult patients often compulsively repeat the experience of lost love of the parent. While considering this, he writes that the "tie of affection, which binds the child as a rule to the parent of the opposite sex, succumbs to disappointment, to a vain expectation of satisfaction or to jealousy over the birth of a new baby—unmistakable proof of the

[138] Freud, 600.
[139] Cherniavsky here is drawing on the work of feminist scholars such as Madelon Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Ithica: Cornell UP, 1989).

infidelity of the object of the child's affections."[140] Freud is clearly concerned with the development and troubles of heterosexual subjects, ruling out as he does even the possibility that a child may take the parent of the same gender as the original love object. Freud's repression of the perverse in his analysis is evident in the liberties he takes with the myth of Aristophanes. He relates the story of the origin of sexuality as told in Plato's *Symposium*. Quoting Plato's Aristophanes, he recounts how human nature has changed. "In the first place, the sexes were originally three in number, not two as they are now; there was man, woman, and the union of the two."[141] He then recounts how Zeus decided to cut the beings in two and how, "after the division had been made, the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and threw their arms about one another eager to grow into one."[142] As Judith Roof has pointed out, Freud reads Plato's text quite selectively, eliding, for example, the creatures of the "same doubled gender."[143] "The first genus of sexuality—the homo, the perverse—is the repressed upon which the second, heterosexual reproductive story ultimately depends."[144]

Like the sexual subject in Freud's text, I want to suggest that the discursive subject in Cherniavsky's model of AIDS melodrama viewership is presumed to be a heterosexual male from the outset and that the psychic/social conflicts she explores may not have the same affective/ideological pull for non-straights as they do for *some* heterosexuals. What I am not trying to do is make some kind of essentialist argument

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[140] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay, ed. (New York: Norton, 1989), 623.
[141] Freud, 622-623.
[142] Freud, 623.
[143] Roof, 27.
[144] Roof, 29.

about the ways in which heterosexuals and homosexuals are inherently and universally different. Rather, I simply want to point out that Cherniavsky employs a troubling, uncritical version of psychoanalysis here to understand sexual identity, melodrama, and the spectator.

Steve Pile has suggested that one kind of productive engagement with psychoanalytic theory can proceed from the rereading of the myths on which Freud based many of his fundamental ideas. By expanding and reinterpreting them, it is possible to "map out other co-ordinates of subjectivity."[145] This is precisely what Roof has begun to do in regards to Freud's use of Aristophanes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Pursuing this further would take me far a field of my current concerns. However, Pile reminds us, through his own rereading of the Oedipus and Narcissus myths, that these myths are not so much "universal models of sexual differentiation and personality formation" as they are "stories of how individuals cope with situations with which they are presented, in conditions where they do not (fully) appreciate what is going on."[146] In rereading Oedipus, the important point for him is that, "while they are *meant* to take one of two (heterosexual) routes through the Oedipus complex, children will forever find their own way out."[147] The return of the repressed (feminine/real) in *Philadelphia* only appears to be as shattering as it does for Chernivasky because she sees gender and sexual identity to be the end result of a "unidirectional, universal shift" from the feminine real to the

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[145] Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 117.
[146] Pile, 117.
[147] Pile, 111.

masculine Symbolic, precisely the type of understanding of psychoanalysis that Pile has argued against.[148]

Paula Treichler analyzes NBC's *An Early Frost* (1985) and ABC's *Our Sons*, the first TV movies to deal with the subject of HIV/AIDS, in order to demonstrate the difficulty of determining whether, to what degree, and in what circumstances a "particular cultural production embodies or undermines 'dominant' cultural values and positions."[149] Independent and activist media productions have been given a privileged position in the theoretical and critical discourses surrounding AIDS and the US media for several reasons, briefly summarized by Crimp in his "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism." Because, he writes, broadcast TV has been the major source of information on AIDS and because broadcast TV approaches AIDS from solely within the "dominant discourse," AIDS TV discourse generated its own "critical counter-practice in the same medium," a "critical, theoretical, activist alternative" that could potentially assist the audience in knowing, analyzing, and wresting control of cultural constructions of AIDS.[150] Treichler clearly concurs with Crimp on this point. Elsewhere she submits network and public TV to a thorough critique for the "passive" approach they have taken on representing HIV/AIDS, for their failure to "challenge or subvert dominant accounts of AIDS."[151] Even as HIV/AIDS coverage on network and public television diversified throughout the 1990s, for Treichler, they could not compete with, for example,

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[148] Pile, 140.
[149] Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 161.
[150] Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," *October 43* (Winter 1987), 14-15. For a book-length discussion of video productions on HIV/AIDS, see Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995.
[151] Treichler, 129.

independent video maker John Greyson's "imagination, political acuity, or pizzazz."[152] Treichler laments the lack of truly original TV productions on HIV/AIDS and the potentially radically different positions they may have eclipsed:

> Think, for example, of the stories that might have been told, that should have been told, about gay men and the epidemic. Instead, we have two bland, humanistic, made-for-TV movies. Created with better-than-average production values, resources, and good intentions, ultimately, these movies are a pathetic legacy.[153]

Still, Treichler insists that we not neglect understanding the complex ways in which mainstream media texts produce meaning and insists we do not oversimplify the cultural work of broadcast TV, which is why her work is useful here.

When trying to think through the issue of "sex roles" in *An Early Frost* she concludes that the TV movie's critics, including especially AIDS activists, can find "solid evidence" for "calling this one more gay movie for straight people, this judgment assumes that we fully understand the nature of the viewing subject, how identification occurs, and how people engage with television."[154] For her, this problem of whether or not, when, and to what extent mainstream media productions reproduce "dominant cultural values" hinges on the issue of the viewer and the processes by which he or she identifies with the text. On the one hand are the formal points of identification that any media text makes available: "the trajectory of the drama; the structure and angle of the

[152] Treichler, 148.
[153] Treichler, 203.
[154] Treichler, 187.

camera shots; our knowledge; our knowledge of the characters' knowledge; characters' function in the drama" as well as, "their role in producing irony, laughter, and pathos; and their ability to mark difference, to offend, to charm."[155] Closely related are the textual and intertextual relations that help shape the cultural work such as "language, linguistic patterning, dramatic and emotive associations," "allusion," and "metaphor." On the other hand are also the elements that the viewer brings to the interaction. Among the ones Treichler identifies as significant are "memory," "life experience," and "emotional and political connections to the text, and psychic commitments."[156] Importantly, she writes that "the narrative structures of film and television can provide [a] sense of shared experience."[157] These aspects of the viewing situation, both textual properties and intertextual relations as they interact with what the viewer contributes to the viewing situation as well as the sense of shared experience that narratives can lend, are what I want to emphasize in my analyses of these films.

How does all of this begin to come together? What does the approach to understanding AIDS films I have been suggesting look like? It concentrates on tactics of film viewing, and how cinematic codes, intertextual relations, and the viewer's own extracinematic contributions influence them. It understands viewing as deeply imbricated in the creation of cultural memory, that terrain of culturally negotiated and contested meanings and recollections. Viewers of AIDS films, as makers and shapers of cultural memory, are concerned with placing themselves in history and with using the

[155] Treichler, 203.
[156] Treichler, 202-203.
[157] Treichler, 202.

past to understand their own lives in the present historical moment. These cultural memories need to be understood as markers of collective needs, desires, and self-definitions, and as such they are the active and creative ways in which viewers remake the world as meaningful in the wake of HIV/AIDS.

These viewing tactics, furthermore, can be framed as a type of "bearing witness" that reaches beyond the realm of personal suffering in order to make connections, to create a public culture based on the experience and memory of shared loss. While, the narrative structures of the AIDS films discussed here may provide a sense of shared experience, that sense of shared experience is ultimately the achievement of the viewer. Film viewing as bearing witness is socially significant for a number of reasons: it helps to articulate and to clarify the significance of a shared event or loss; helps make sense of unexpected loss; helps become a means by which the viewer can protest against an uncaring world; helps to create a record of the dying and the dead; helps to confront and transform loss, both the loss of friends, family, and lovers but also the loss of a "culture of sexual possibility"; helps to create new possibilities for identifications, desires, and a sense of place; finally, it can help in the process of healing.

Chapter Five: Bearing Witness and Utopian Longing: Interpreting AIDS Films

The two viewing tactics that I wish to explore are molded by prevailing notion of HIV/AIDS as "disease" that has the capacity to destroy personal memory and to eradicate individual identity. These two tactics are further shaped by, reflect, and in turn, inform the whole range of extracinematic cultural concerns of the public culture of AIDS: bewilderment, uncertainty, dread; mourning and melancholia; the past, history, memory, and nostalgia; ambivalence and contradiction; "placelessness" and wandering; hauntings; and blurred and/or dissolved boundaries. It is in these concerns that we can begin to discern both desire and resistance, the sense of "utopian longing" that has emerged in the wake of HIV/AIDS.

RETHINKING GAY IDENTITY IN *PARTING GLANCES*

I now want to shift focus to describing and contextualizing the reception of *Parting Glances* in order to explore the first tactic for remaking meaning in the wake of the AIDS crisis, that of marking/making identity. It is not coincidental that AIDS films have consistently been at the center of the rethinking of the gay subject in the wake of HIV/AIDS. The responses to the film take shape around numerous concerns which frame and inform these viewers' understandings: the independent/mainstream cinema dichotomy and the relationship between the gay male subject and the dominant heterosexual culture. Of particular importance is the issue of gay male sexuality in the wake of AIDS. What we witness is the gradual resurrection of gay male erotic life in

these interpretations over time. This case study explores the shifts in the critical literature from a valorization of the "normalization" of "homosexuality" and a commitment to the politics of visibility to the concern with how the film suggests new forms of sexuality and subjectivity that exceed previous identities. This shift, I argue, is a move away from the melancholic's abject repudiation of the culture of sexual possibility to a more utopian longing for the vibrant sexual culture that HIV/AIDS disrupted.

This initial repudiation occurs in Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*, in the 1987 edition of his study of images of lesbians and gays in film a chapter entitled, "Taking the Game Away From Hollywood: Finding a Voice and Facing a Backlash." Here he examines a number of Hollywood and independent films made after 1981 when the book was first published, noticing an "increased visibility" of lesbians and gays that is both tenuous and dangerous—dangerous because the implotment of "homosexuality" quite often occurs in denigrating circumstances at the same time that violence against lesbians and gay men in America is on the rise. One change which Russo welcomes, however, is the ability of a cluster of independent films, which includes *Parting Glances*, to bring to the screen "realistic characters who happen to be gay."[1] This, for Russo, is the major virtue of *Parting Glances*, that the "film revealed that movies can explore gay life without being about gay life."[2] Russo explains this quote earlier when he writes that "the casual, seemingly unconscious integration of a character's gayness into a wider focus" is what differentiates recent independent films from earlier films with lesbian or gay

[1] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Revised Edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 248.
[2] Russo, 310.

characters. More recent films "are less likely to be pugnacious about issues or strictly didactic in tone."[3] In *Parting Glances*, "the gayness of the milieu is taken for granted" in a way that produces "the most realistic re-creation of the world in which New York gays live that has ever actually been put on screen."[4] In contrast to the independent films Russo discusses are the Hollywood films which choose "to ignore that people are gay in the same way that people are short or blond or left-handed . . . a useful political stance that keeps homosexuality controversial."[5]

Several of the themes introduced in Russo's discussion reappear in the criticism of the film published at about the same time and again several years later. One recurring concern is the integration of straights and gays. For instance, Russo writes, "[g]ays tend to forget that it's news to most Americans that gays have straight friends."[6] Richard Lippe is also concerned with the film's success in addressing "the broader issues of gay lifestyles, gay communities, and gay history" and its situating the gay characters within a milieu "that contains both gays and nongays."[7] Simon Watney claims "the aim of the film is not simply 'normalization,' but a demonstration of the actual diversity of urban New York life, and the centrality of gay men in the social life of the city."[8] Moreover, both Russo and Watney point to how the film implots shifts within gay male culture. For Russo, a scene in which "Michael almost slugs a cab driver who calls him and his

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[3] Russo, 306.
[4] Russo, 306, 309.
[5] Russo, 248.
[6] Russo, 310.
[7] Richard Lippe, "Gay Visibility: Contemporary Images," *Cineaction! 7* (Winter 1986): 86.
[8] Watney, "Short-Term," in *Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art & Contemporary Cultures*, Allan Klusacek and Ken Morrison, eds. (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1992), 155.

boyfriend 'faggots' . . . is made truer because [the boyfriend] Robert abhors Michael's militant reaction and is embarrassed by it."[9] If it is the tension between militancy and mainstreaming that Russo locates as the film's "subtext," it is the "difficult social relations between different generations of gay men, and the divisions of class within gay communities in the U.S." that the film allegorizes according to Watney.[10]

At the time of the film's release, the mainstream press, addressing a presumed straight audience, is preoccupied with the film's depiction of gay male sexuality. An article in the *New York Post* points out that the film portrays "a lot of dancing, horseplay, and even a sequence on the sands of Fire Island where the musclemen abound," but assures the reader that while "the relationships may seem a bit on the feverish side, they are not pornographic."[11] A writer in *Newsday* cautions that if "you have a low threshold for watching men kissing and rassling, you may not make it through the first five minutes . . . . If you manage to stay with it there are some affecting moments. Which surprised me."[12]

Yet among gay writers the film's portrayal of gay male erotic life in the wake of the AIDS crisis enters the discussion only in retrospect with the 1992 publication of Thomas Waugh's "Erotic Self Images in the Gay Male AIDS Melodrama." The article examines how the mingling of melodrama and sexuality in a number of independent films about AIDS produces "some of the most important gay male cultural responses to

[9] Russo, 313.
[10] Watney, "Short-Term," 154.
[11] Archer Winstein, Review of *Cruising*, *New York Post*, 15 Feb. 1980, 40.
[12] Joseph Gelmis, Review of *Cruising*, *Newsday*, 15 Feb. 1980, 7.

the epidemic."[13] "The sexualization of the person with AIDS" which the author discusses is significant because it functions as a "reversal of the silencing, inoculation, and ridicule that have occulted to the reality of these figures in the media."[14] However, in contrast to a number of melodramas in which a sexual exchange between men is personally and dramatically transformative, *Parting Glances* "ultimately articulates an attitude towards sexuality that is ambiguous at the very best and at worst symptomatic of a cynical distrust of sexuality that has been reinforced by the health crisis."[15] For Waugh, rather than affirming the sexual agency of the person with AIDS, the film suggests that sexuality is something that "should be left behind." The figure of Nick, an HIV-positive character, exhibits a "sexual glamour" and "punkish friskiness" that are spent on "unconsummated gay flirtations with the film's protagonist."[16]

In the final response which I wish to describe, Thomas Yingling contrasts *Parting Glances* with several mainstream gay male romances that "work to liberalize our attitude toward homosexuality by presenting bourgeois gay couples whose love for one another establishes their sameness to bourgeois heterosexual couples."[17] Nick remains a figure of "excess" for Yingling, one that "retains a sexual energy lost to melodramatic mourning" in numerous other films.[18] *Parting Glances* moves "the question of subjectivity around AIDS from one of hopeless loss to one of exuberant expenditure."[19] Elsewhere Yingling

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[13] Thomas Waugh, "Erotic Self-Images in the Gay Male Melodrama," in *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*, James Miller, ed. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992), 122.
[14] Waugh, 125.
[15] Waugh, 127.
[16] Waugh, 127.
[17] Thomas Yingling, *AIDS and the National Body* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 27.
[18] Yingling, 28.
[19] Yingling, 28.

writes that AIDS "is the disease that announces the death of identity."[20] For him, even more telling about living with AIDS than *Parting Glances* and other "referential" texts are the "allegorical" texts of "body loss" such as David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) because "they place in motion alienation from a body that no longer houses a subject" and "also because they foreground the impossibility of speaking the condition of loss."[21]

It is significant that each openly gay author underscores that *Parting Glances* is an "independent film." Waugh refers to it also as an example of "self-representation," or a film made by and for gay men, but because his concern is more with generic reconfigurations than with authorship and authenticity, themes which dominate Russo's discussion, he does not discuss the film's writer and director, Bill Sherwood. That Russo relies on Sherwood's authority in defining how the film is intended to operate is evident in his quoting the filmmaker as saying: "The way I work as a filmmaker is that the gayness is assumed. Instead of starting out with some passionate cause . . . I just wanted to make a movie," words which echo throughout Russo's discussion described earlier.[22]

Film historian Richard Dyer situates *Parting Glances* in relation to the affirmational tradition of lesbian and gay documentary cinema which grew out of the Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s. Affirmational cinema was invested in the notion that non-straight film makers making films about non-straights could produce a "countervailing tradition" when centered on "positive images." Dyer explains that "positive" was equated with authenticity and the assertion of presence and worth. About

[20] Yingling, 15.
[21] Yingling, 16.
[22] Russo, 311.

the sexual identity of the filmmaker, he writes, "it does not matter who made the film so long as it empowers the lesbian/gay subject. Yet it does affect how we look at and experience the film."[23] Within the Gay Liberationist paradigm, which is where I situate Russo, the identity of the author was often crucial in structuring the gay spectator's response. That Russo sees in the film an almost "documentary realism" again attests to his belief, shared with many, of the authority and self-knowledge afforded the gay subject, which were hard won in the struggle of "coming out." It is not only the shared experience of marginalization, but this authority and knowledge attributed to the gay subject within the Liberationist paradigm, and the discourse on gay authorship that enable Russo, along with Watney and Lippe to see in *Parting Glances* shifts occurring with gay male culture at the time of its production.

Waugh, too, seems concerned with the ability, or in this case failure, of cinematic self-representations to create "positive" images. A significant shift between Waugh and Russo, however, is evident in the configuration of "positive." If Russo searches for authenticity, presence, and worth, Waugh seeks the reclamation of sexual agency for people with AIDS. Many of the early writings on HIV/AIDS by gay men and AIDS activists point to the ways in which male homosexuality is discussed as the cause of AIDS. Underlying this association is a certain "erotophobia," to use Cindy Patton's term. Other writers point to the ways in which AIDS impacted gay male erotics. Watney writes, "AIDS threatens not only our health but our very social identity."[24] He claims

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[23] Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies On Lesbian and Gay Film* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 247.
[24] Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: AIDS, Pornography and the Media* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), 18.

that the means by which the gay culture of the 1970s encouraged "the desublimating of sexual guilt" were undermined in the wake of the AIDS crisis by "a wholesale de-sexualization of gay culture and experience . . . [and a] re-homosexualization of homosexuality back into a culture of repression which, I should add, is the antithesis . . . of sexual affirmation."[25] Leo Bersani writes, "Far from apologizing for their promiscuity as a failure to maintain a loving relationship, far from welcoming the return to monogamy as a beneficent consequence of the horror of AIDS, gay men should ceaselessly lament the practical necessity, now, of such relationships."[26] Patton writes, "Lesbian/gay liberationists throughout the AIDS crisis have insisted that AIDS must not be viewed as proof that sexual exploration and the elaboration of sexual community were mistakes."[27] Yet, the "sex question," that is, the debates about promiscuity, public sex, and other forms of sex "radicalism," create "the possibility of renewing the radical notions of lesbian/gay liberation that have gotten lost or seem outdated as the movement as a whole has drifted toward civil rights and reformism."[28] Waugh points to the gay male melodrama as a corrective to the desexualization of people with AIDS in the mainstream media, but what enables his analysis is the emerging debate around the "sex question" within the gay counterpublic sphere. Not only were AIDS activists fighting for funding, policy changes, AIDS education, and health reform, they were simultaneously theorizing and rewriting their own sexual identities, cultures, and desires in relation to the AIDS crisis.

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[25] Watney, *Policing*, 18.
[26] Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *October 43* (Winter, 1987): 218.
[27] Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), 142.
[28] Patton, 151.

Each of these interpretations emerges at a moment of heightened conflict within the gay counterpublic sphere, not as a neutral and disinterested analysis, but as a more or less conscious and deliberate intervention into the creation of notions of identity and the contexts that inform and shape it. Russo's analysis employs a confrontational rhetoric aimed at the "straight-identified" gay audience that would prefer the "homophobic" *My Beautiful Laundrette* over the more "progressive" *Parting Glances*, thus enacting a similar conflict to the timely one he sees dramatized between militancy and mainstreaming in the film itself. Waugh recenters the importance of gay male sexual pleasure at a time when the "sex question" has both gays and straights, in Patton's words, "chim[ing]: 'If you would just stop fucking everything that moves, AIDS would eventually be licked.'"[29] And Yingling insists on an analysis of AIDS that begins from what Bersani has called an "anti-identitarian" position and dismisses the notion of "positive images" at a time when the dominant mode of critique begins from within the politics of identity and calls for an end to negative stereotyping.

PARTING GLANCES AS ELEGY

As stated previously, much writing about the AIDS crisis and AIDS films is preoccupied with identity and memory. We only need to recall David Wojnarowicz's disappearing social environment or Andrew Holleran's "pointless landscape" to begin to understand how AIDS was—and is—understood as having the capacity to destroy collective identities. Because AIDS was understood as having that capacity, a certain urgency was given to the task of rethinking individual and collective identities and

[29] Patton, 140.

rescuing desire from the erasures enacted by the medical establishment, news media, the religious right, and other gay men. In these writings is an exploration of memory, too—the "revolving screen" of past and present in Wojnarowicz and Holleran's "Museum of the Past"—and it is evident in the backward glances cast by the writers of these AIDS testimonies. Wojnarowicz thought of himself as a repository of memories who was obligated to memorialize the dead whose passings he had witnessed. Both Wojnarowicz and Holleran see themselves surrounded by ghostly bodies and missing persons. Each author, in fact, constructs a sense of the past (and present) as seen through the eyes of an endangered "survivor," summoning the dead in order to memorialize the dead's lives and make sense of the living's present, ambivalent, diminished circumstances. These are testimonial acts of "bearing witness," writing that has been shaped by and attempts to shape cultural memories about HIV/AIDS. AIDS films were not only used for the critique of the gay "subject of HIV/AIDS" and seen as providing the raw materials needed for a refashioning of identity and desire, as I have already discussed, they were viewed as "memory texts," texts that embodied and could shape memories of HIV/AIDS and memories of life before HIV/AIDS had appeared. The writers I will discuss use these films to make sense of the present, but also, as I shall show, to import their own stories of life, love, and loss and the stories of the dead and dying into cultural memory in order to create countercultural memories of HIV/AIDS. In this way, viewing AIDS films becomes a kind of bearing witness. That is the project to which I now turn.

Perhaps now it is more obvious why Watney refers to *Parting Glances* as an elegiac film. First is a renewed investment in the writing and criticism of elegy in the wake of HIV/AIDS. AIDS elegies become a highly visible and respectable genre of

writing. These AIDS elegies are themselves a specific kind of "bearing witness" that performs important cultural work. Second, it serves Watney's purposes to do so as AIDS elegies had developed their own kind of politics of intervention which resonated with Watney's concerns about representation, memorialization, and the construction of a bridge to those not aware of the devastation AIDS was causing. Third, the film lends itself to such an interpretation, if only subtlety at first glance, and only to those whose memories, political and psychic commitments, life experiences, intertextual knowledges, and affective connections encourage this type of viewing tactic.

Just as AIDS poems that cannot be considered elegies per se have elegiac moments—being as they are shaped by an elegiac consciousness—so do AIDS films have moments that we could identify as elegiac. Instances I will discuss here are the use of memorials, a preoccupation with ghosts, and its twist on the elegiac ending. Consider, for example, how *Parting Glances* opens and closes with shots of a New York City memorial. In the opening moments of the film, Robert is jogging through the city while Michael sits at the base of the monument waiting and reading. As Robert arrives and the two begin their walk toward home together, the film cuts to a second long shot and seen in its entirety, is the landmark known as the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Riverside Park at 89th and Riverside.[30] The Soldiers' and Sailors' monument is a sizable marble memorial to the Civil War dead which took its inspiration from the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in Athens, Greece. As the couple turn and walk away from the park, the film cuts to a close-up of the inscription at the top of the monument. Seen from

[30] Thanks to Janet Staiger for helping me identify this landmark.

the angle that the camera is positioned, only part of the inscription is visible and it reads: "To the memory of the . . . ." Here the film is announcing its impulse to name the dead and dying.

The film ends with a similar long shot of the lone Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in the park to the one that opened the film, and the image fades as the closing credits being to roll; finally, a dedication appears at the end of the credits: "For Mark, Billy, & Paul." The opening few moments of the film provide a sense of the losses that implicitly give the film its shape. By not revealing the "true" object of the monumental inscription, *Parting Glances* opens up the memorial space to "others." It becomes a quiet monument to the AIDS dead, the Marks, Billys, Pauls lost during the first years of AIDS crisis in New York City. In this way, the opening and closing shots of *Parting Glances* serve as reminders of the collective, unstated grief shared by the filmmakers and the target audience. They reveal the elegiac consciousness that shapes the film and its reception.[31]

That *Parting Glances* utilizes a war memorial to convey this sense of loss is not really surprising. I have already discussed how testimonial and theoretical writing about AIDS often relies on war metaphors. The "war on AIDS" became one, controversial, way to conceptualize the activist response to the AIDS crisis. Similarly, those affected by HIV/AIDS have tended, as mentioned, to understand the scope of their loss as being on par with those caused by World War II. A war memorial is a sanctified site that

[31] Mark Pegrum extends a discussion of elegy into music, looking at, among other songs, Bruce Springsteen's "Streets of Philadelphia" from the *Philadelphia* soundtrack. Mark Pegrum, "Elegies," *Mots Pluriels* 1.3 (1997), Available online, < http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP397mpeg2.html>.

serves as a marker of cultural memory, either as a reminder to future generations of some kind of heroic sacrifice or as a warning of events that would be best not repeated. Sanctified sites are easily recognized within the landscape as they are "clearly bounded from the surrounding environment and marked with great specificity," and once sanctified, these sites are tended to with great care for generations to come.[32] Moreover, according to Kenneth Foote, sanctified sites often "attract additional and sometimes unrelated monuments and memorials through a process of accretion. That is, once sanctified, these sites seem to act as foci for other commemorative efforts."[33] Thus, in its appropriation of a Civil War landmark, *Parting Glances* also borrows the ability of monuments to sanctify and honor particular sites and particular people in order to suggest the great loss and historically significant sacrifice of the "heroes" who died in the battle against HIV/AIDS. No memorials to the AIDS dead could compare to the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in New York City or the even more magnificent monuments in Washington, D.C., that serve to glorify US history and state power. Other monuments, then, have, on occasion, had to serve as the focus for the memorializing impulse associated with HIV/AIDS. The appropriation of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument here anticipates and suggests the tactic, beginning in 1987, of displaying the AIDS Memorial Quilt on the Mall in Washington, D.C., and the significance of this event as a demand for recognition and inclusion and also as a means of highlighting the complicity of "the nation" in the deaths of so many from HIV/AIDS. If the discourses of American

[32] Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, Revised and Updated (Austin: U of Texas P, 1997), 9.
[33] Foote, 9.

nationalism wished to marginalize AIDS and PWAs, bringing the quilt to the symbolic center of American national identity was a way of resisting that marginalization.[34]

Henry Abelove has written: "Nothing located or fixed could serve well as a memorial to our losses."[35] I have already suggested that the AIDS crisis initiated a sense of placelessness for many. It follows that the sites of violence and tragedy related to HIV/AIDS are themselves not sanctified sites, nor hardly ever even designated spots on the landscape, even though they continue to shape cultural memories of the AIDS crisis. The absence or invisibility of these sites suggests the ways in which the "landshape of memory" is an effect of power. For Henri Lefebvre, "monumentality" is a condensation and valorization of social space built upon a repression of differences. Monumentality attempts to squelch conflict and impose consensus: "To the degree that there are traces of violence and death, negativity and aggressiveness in social practice, the monumental erases them with a tranquil power and certitude which can encompass violence and terror."[36] Social space for Lefebvre is a web of relations of production and reproduction, and "monuments constitute the strong points or anchors of such webs."[37] The more significant and awe-inspiring the monument, the more trivial the surrounding landscape and those that inhabit it are made to seem.[38] Not only does the appropriation of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument attempt to memorialize the AIDS dead, but there are

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[34] Sturken, 215-217.
[35] Henry Abelove, "The Politics of the Gay Plague: AIDS as a U.S. Ideology," in *Body Politics: Disease, Desire, and the Family*, Michael Ryan and Avery Gordon, eds. (Boulder: Westview, 1994), 7.
[36] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 222.
[37] Lefebvre, 222.
[38] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 35.

other overtly political implications. As discussed, it imports the discourses of war and social struggle into *Parting Glances* yet it also attempts to draw attention to the erasures that monumentality effects. The viewer is encouraged to reflect on the tension between the monument's "official" inscription ("To the memory of . . .") and the graffiti that decorates its walls, balustrades, and pedestals, drawn, we imagine, by those who tend to be silenced by and written out of history; they are the markings of those who are most often erased and not remembered, those positioned outside of the landmark's field of care, who, in response, must find different ways of trying to imprint themselves into history, much in the same manner that Sherwood is trying to ensure that HIV/AIDS remains an integral part of cultural memories of New York City and the American past.

Parting Glances shares with AIDS elegies not only the impulse to memorialize but a preoccupation with ghosts. A menacing, shadowy apparition wearing a suit of armor who appears twice in the film haunts the character Nick in *Parting Glances*. Numerous associations could be made here. The figure is a kind of "grim reaper," and Nick is frightened at having to confront his own newly-awakened sense of mortality. The figure is a medieval one, and earlier in the film, when talking to Michael, Nick suggests that AIDS "puts us back in the fourteenth century." Maybe together, these are meant to suggest that Nick is worried that he is being stalked by some kind of "plague" ("plague" being a common, quite reactionary way of conceptualizing the AIDS epidemic in its early years). Perhaps Nick, who is fiercely independent and who resists, but also appreciates, Michael's care taking, is alarmed by the whole idea of having to be rescued by a "knight" (which, ironically, he *is* when at the end of the film Michael comes to Fire Island to save Nick from himself). The armored figure also brings to mind the power-laden scientific

constructions of the contemporary biomedical body and its social context discussed by Marita Sturken: "The rigid bodily boundaries of the immune system model are directly related to a depiction of the external world as inherently hostile. There is no room for ambiguity or transgression."[39]

A passage from Wojnarowicz resonates most clearly with this motif in the film for me. Wojnarowicz is astonished by how death can present itself in such a relentless way, destroying the ground that gives the author his footing while an entire population watches with approval. "And I am amazed to discover that I have been building a suit of armor in response to the extensive amount of death overtaking members of my social landscape . . . . The grief hardens and is added to the armor."[40] An emphasis is in Wojnarowicz on the importance of collective identity ("social landscape") and public rituals of life (protest) and death (mourning). Similarly, AIDS elegies emphasize "relational identity" formed in a "celebratory sexual context" that rejects the "modes of male bonding" of traditional elegies, invested as they are in repudiating the homoerotic in order to celebrate the achievement of an individual, heterosexual male identity.[41] The elegiac poetry of Essex Hemphill, for example, rejects "compulsory heterosexuality" *and* "the accompanying clichés about the doomed, suicidal, solitary, or passive character of the outsider."[42] This rejection is significant given the critique of gay culture by Jeff Nunokawa, who sees the AIDS elegies of James Merrill, for example, as complicit with

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[39] Sturken, 224.
[40] David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books. 1991), 230.
[41] Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithica: Cornell UP, 1997), 120.
[42] Zeiger, 114.

the homophobic notion of "doom as the specific fate of gay men."[43] Nunokawa is cautioning that the long-standing notion about the "lethal character of male homosexuality" has helped create a "kinder, gentler, and perhaps more pervasive homophobia" that "counsels acquiescence to the catastrophic effects of AIDS."[44] The danger here is that gay men will come to accept their "fate" as doomed to extinction through a "morbid identification" with the figures of the gay lethality.

The figure of the doomed gay man, however, cannot simply be censored out of existence. Rather, Nunokawa suggests the best way to cope with it is to investigate how the "rumor of our doom" can be both invoked and displaced in certain texts.[45] Zeiger is concerned with how AIDS elegies may work within but also against "a poetics of internalized doom."[46] For her, the many ghosts in AIDS elegies do not simply reveal a morbid identification with the dead. "The ghosts of AIDS poetry, and the politics they enact," she writes, "refuse to let the living safely die away. Conversely, the poets overwhelmingly read their summoning of ghosts as a refusal to resign their attachment to life, the body, pleasure, political engagement."[47] Similarly, the ghost in *Parting Glances* is, for me, a way of invoking and rejecting this sense of inevitable doom.

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[43] Jeff Nunokawa, "'All the Sad Young Men': AIDS and the Work of Mourning," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories/Gay Theories*, Diana Fuss, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 317.
[44] Nunokawa, 317. For more on representations of the "lethality" of the gay male and how this has structured gay subjectivity, see: Leo Bersani. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October 43* (Winter, 1987): 197-222; Ellis Hanson, "Undead," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories/Gay Theories*, Diana Fuss, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991): 324-340; Michael Camille, "The Abject Gaze and the Homosexual Body: Flandrin's Figure d'Etude," *Journal of Homosexuality* 27.1-2 (1994): 161-188; Richard Dyer, "Coming Out as Going In: The Image of the Homosexual as Sad Young Man," *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 73-92.
[45] Nunokawa, 320.
[46] Zeiger, 129
[47] Zeiger, 133.

Consider the two appearances of Nick's ghost. In the first, Nick is at home listening to the Second Act of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which Michael gave him as a gift, as the ghost of the Commandatore is demanding that Don Giovanni repent for seducing his daughter, Donna Anna, and then slaying the Commandatore himself in a duel. Just as Don Giovanni refuses to repent and is about to be carried off to hell by the Commandatore's ghost, Nick notices his rock band's video on television and throws off the headphones to call Michael who doesn't answer. When we next see Nick, he is recording a video will in which he leaves money to some friends and to GMHC and his dildo to Robert. "Michael," he says, "I'll never understand why you fell in love with that geek." He also warns his father: "Don't say it's my fault. It wasn't. And if you do, I'm going to haunt you." The third scene with Nick in this sequence, which intercuts scenes of Michael and Robert on their final night in New York together and Nick at home alone, has Nick wandering off to the kitchen where he sees the apparition, identified as "Commandatore (ghost)" in the credits, lurking in a dark corner of the next room. He blinks and the figure disappears. Frantic and frightened, he throws on his clothes and rushes out the door for Joan's surprise going away party for Robert. The film cuts to the party where Michael is confessing to Joan that he has always loved Nick more than Robert; he doesn't know where Nick "leaves off and I begin" and he has always thought of themselves as "two sides of the same coin."

Numerous details are worth noting here. The first is the surprisingly seldom discussed significance of *Don Giovanni* in this context which is a recording that Michael gave to Nick. Don Giovanni is a villain in Mozart's opera, a shameless libertine and seducer of the innocent. His being dragged to hell by the father of the young woman he

corrupted is seen as “just punishment” for his immoral sexuality. Nick, then, could be understood as struggling against a conventional morality that he knows condemns him for his former “promiscuous lifestyle.” Remember, he already told his father that this was not the truth and if he insisted on understanding Nick’s life on those terms, Nick would haunt him. That the record was a gift to Nick from Michael underscores how Michael feels about him, as a “Don Juan”—which Robert clearly is not—a suave, sexy, rebellious, irresistible lover.

Later that night, after Nick receives a drunken phone call from Robert telling him goodbye, he rolls over to see the figure of the Commandatore once again. This time, as smokes pours through the apartment, the ghost hisses “Repent” and Nick replies with a tentative “no.” At that point, the Commandatore tells him, “It’s your ass,” then lifts the face plate of his helmet, peels off a pair of “punky” sunglasses of which Nick has a large collection and takes a drag off of his cigarette. Nick identifies the ghost as Greg, a friend who the audience learned earlier had only lived for six months after he was diagnosed with AIDS. Greg whispers to him that heaven is a bore and Nick needs to hang on for as long as he can. Nick asks why they are whispering and Greg tells him that it is “spookier” that way. Greg gives him a hard time for letting Michael turn him into an opera queen. He coughs and admits that he overdid it with the smoke, which is becoming so heavy that it is now difficult to see him. His parting words to Nick are, “Oh, if you go on a trip, make sure to take . . . .” Nicks calls for him to come back since he did not hear what he was supposed to take with him, but Greg is gone. Nick comments that the outfit was just a little too “foofy.”

The point in discussing these scenes in detail is to draw attention to how the figure of the Commandatore (ghost) is transformed in Nick's imagination and in the course of the film from a menacing figure who comes to secure not only Nick's demise but his condemnation into a friend who comes—down from heaven incidentally and not up from hell—to encourage Nick to hang on to life and also to inject a little camp into the film. Through the image and transformation of the Commandatore, the notion of gay male doom it is both invoked and displaced. Like the AIDS elegies discussed by Zeiger, the ghost is ultimately summoned in *Parting Glances* in order to show how the living continue to remember and care for the dead at the same time that the dead serve as reminders to the living to hang on to and value their own lives, bodies, pleasures, and desires in spite of the risks and losses they must continually confront.

The film invokes and displaces the image of the doomed gay man in the very structure of its narrative. In the final minutes of the film Michael receives what he believes is a desperate call at home from Nick who has taken a ferry to Fire Island so that, it is assumed, he can take his own life. Michael charters a seaplane to the island with the intent of rescuing him, only to learn that the call was a prank, and Nick has no desire to die. Rather, he brought Michael to the island because it is the place to which their memories of each other and their passion for each other and for life have attached themselves. This is revealed in a number of flashback scenes that help lend *Parting Glances* the texture of a memory text. Here, too, the film refuses to surrender an attachment to life and pleasure. Rather than satisfying the need to experience this moment as a melodramatic instance of arriving "too late," which the discourses of the preordained death of the gay man have led us to expect, the film surprises us by

disrupting the melodramatic/elegiac pacing and insisting that it is "too soon" for us to begin mourning Nick's death. Perhaps it is the refusal to indulge this fantasy of the doomed gay man which the audience has been conditioned to expect that has led some to suggest that the end was less than satisfying. It *only* offers an "unresolved ending" that proves to be a "dramatic fizzle."[48] Rather than "end" with Nick's death, the "proper" way to close the story given that as gay and HIV+ he is doomed from the start, the film is felt to stop prematurely.

In reuniting first, Michael and Robert and then Michael and Nick, in the final moments of the film, *Parting Glances* ends with an interesting twist on what Zeiger calls the "marriage plot" of traditional elegy. AIDS elegies tend to resist, revise, or reject entirely the "nuptial moment" of elegiac closure.[49] Writers sometimes point to the "hopelessly normative" dimensions of the "impulse toward indissoluble union" and insist on exploring other—often more casual and promiscuous—modes of affection, affinity, and desire in AIDS elegies.[50] Other elegists explore a kind of "reimagined marriage" that acknowledges it, too, as a "heavily invested form of desire" for gay men.[51] Still some poets "substitute another organizing drama: the welcome return of the dead in dream, fantasy, and ghostly manifestation" for the climactic nuptial moment of traditional elegy.[52] This latter substitutive plotting is what is at the end of *Longtime Companion*, a film which has also been discussed in terms of its elegiac qualities, to which I will turn

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[48] John Pierson with Kevin Smith, *Spike, Mike, Slackers, and Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 36.
[49] Zeiger 108-109.
[50] Zeiger 115.
[51] Zeiger 115.
[52] Zeiger 108.

next. *Parting Glances*, however, preserves but reimagines the importance of the nuptial moment.

In Orphean elegy the hero's identity is consolidated in the eradication of homosocial desire and the "derealization of women." These take place through the death and mourning of the object of homoerotic desire that immediately precedes the staged marriage of the hero to his bride who is offered up as consolation for the sacrifice he has made. The homoerotic object of desire and the figure of the woman ultimately threaten the consolidation of heterosexual masculinity, so the former is repudiated through mourning and the latter is invoked only in order to displace homoerotic desire and effect the hero's successful heterosexual, masculine identity. Marriage marks the hero's "desexualizing conversion" and functions "as a sacrificial offering on the altar of death, the moment when the author not only accedes to, but agrees to celebrate, the death of the other."[53]

With the addition of HIV/AIDS and the triangulation of desire between three gay men, *Parting Glances* reconfigures both the characters in this story and their relative functions from the original elegiac triangle. After Robert has departed for Africa and Michael has to confront the reality of their separation, he learns that Nick has also left New York, but for Fire Island to commit suicide. While Michael is making the arrangements to fly to the island to save Nick, Robert returns home, having had a change of heart about leaving, and tells Michael that he has decided to stay with him in New York. The couple has been happily reunited, and were the film to follow both the

[53] Zeiger, 109.

conventional plotting of elegies and melodramatic representations of HIV/AIDS, we might expect that this reunion would function as Michael's, and the audience's, consolation for having to repudiate the figure of the already doomed Nick, the "true" object of Michael's desire. The film denies these expectations, however, by refusing to "sacrifice" Nick and by, in fact, privileging the reunion of Michael and Nick on Fire Island by reserving it for last and by setting it in such an idealized locale. Moreover, their relationship throughout the film is suffused with an erotic and perhaps emotional intensity that his relationship with Robert lacks; the audience is led to believe that their being together is fated and "right."

In this way, *Parting Glances* articulates the desire for an indissoluble union that some AIDS elegists were also working through in their poetry with the idea of a "reimagined marriage." The film affirms Michael's commitment to and desire for both Robert and Nick, however, and in so doing, suggests the possibility for the simultaneous circulation of multiple forms of identification, desire, and affinity. It offers the nuptial moment as an adequate resolution to the story at the same time that it complicates the very idea. Significantly, unlike the traditional elegy, the film refuses to value "the couple" over friendship or to detangle sexual desire from friendship. Again, it seems to share an interest with AIDS elegies in one of its "most consistent endeavors," reconstructing the "epithalamium-elegy nexus in a non-sacrificial mode."[54]

[54] Zeiger, 124.

FIRE ISLAND AS FRONTIER

Above I suggest that Fire Island in *Parting Glances* was an idealized place. This is achieved in several different ways, one of which Hart begins to explain. Hart discusses how AIDS films often draw a distinction between "the city" and "the country" and offer the country as a kind of "balm to [the] injured minds and bodies" of the city.[55] The beach community of Fire Island in *Longtime Companion*, for example, is "where gay men can escape the stresses associated with urban life and the far greater chances of contracting HIV/AIDS in the city."[56] The city for Hart is both simultaneously a gay utopia and an AIDS dystopia from which the characters want and need to escape and against which the country comes to represent "all that is good and moral in America."[57]

Yet others see Fire Island as an origin of the crisis. The epilogue to Ester Newton's history of Cherry Grove, begins not unlike *Longtime Companion*: "The first newspaper stories in 1981 about a strange new illness which seemed to be singling out young gay white men ushered in a decade of decline and trauma in the Grove."[58] Soon, we witness a community ravaged by AIDS, denial, and death. An uneasiness develops about Fire Island due to political concerns over assimilation and consumerism but mostly due to the advent of AIDS. "Unprotected anal intercourse within an organized network of sexual contact—Cherry Grove, as we will see, was one of the prime locales—enabled the rapid transmission of the disease."[59] As a central location in the unfolding story about

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[55] Hart, 68.
[56] Hart, 74.
[57] Hart, 78.
[58] Ester Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 285.
[59] Newton, 9.

HIV/AIDS, Fire Island becomes for Newton one of the "maelstroms of loss and magnets for homophobic hatred."[60]

Suggesting, as Hart does, that Fire Island simply signified a place of reduced risk of exposure to HIV and therefore an escape from the ravages of AIDS misunderstands how Fire Island was also imagined as a place of decline, trauma, and death during the 1980s and 1990s. Neither does suggesting that Fire Island represented for gays what is "good and moral" about American culture truly capture the complicated relationship between Fire Island and "mainland" values. Rather, Fire Island was in some ways a gay microcosm of "America." Yet it was imagined outside of the constraints of a homophobic society that wanted to impose its often objectionable ideas of what is "good and moral" unto the residents and visitors of Fire Island. At the same time that it was "America," Fire Island, as Russo explains it to Newton, represented a chance "to be part of something unique."[61] Part of what gives Fire Island its uniqueness is the long history of public sex associated with it. David Bergman writes of the "sexual sublime" in relation to the representations of Fire Island in literature.[62] Consistently, for many gays it is associated with the culture of public sex that evolved there. In *Parting Glances*, the representation of the space is nostalgic for a frontier as utopian possibility of another sort of community with its own sexual mores.

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[60] Newton, 10.
[61] Newton, 298.
[62] David Bergman, "Beauty and the Beach: Representing Fire Island," *Public Sex/Gay Space*, William L. Leap, ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 1999), 108.

According to Donna Penn, Newton overestimates the significance of Cherry Grove within lesbian and gay US history.[63] Penn argues that Fire Island must be positioned alongside other locations of lesbian and gay cultures while also situated within the context of a longer history of lesbian and gay public culture which predates it. Newton is certainly not alone in the tendency to think of Fire Island as an "origin." Cultural memories have conspired to make it so. Perhaps more troubling is how Fire Island has been represented as a sort of lost paradise. Newton's cultural history uncovers a nostalgic longing associated with Fire Island. Throughout its history is a struggle to keep Cherry Grove the "way it was." But one narrator notes, "I'm not sure that there ever is 'a way there was' . . . and I'm not even positive that the way we think it was is the way it was."[64] What seems to be acknowledged here is sometimes nostalgic but always the complicated and contradictory past that Fire Island represents. Newton herself calls Cherry Grove a "paradoxical paradise."[65] Bergman refers to Fire Island's "theatrical unreality" and suggests it is as "daunting" as it is appealing.[66] Newton describes the trip to the island shared with her partner as otherworldly: "The magic begins on the ferry ride . . . [as] 'America' is left behind, sinks down in the wake of the ferry, and for an afternoon or a weekend, or a season, we live as others do as if in a dream."[67] Elsewhere, the author likens the town to "Peter Pan's Island of Lost Boys." Fire Island is neither simply a

[63] Donna Penn, "The Present and the Future of Recuperating the Past: A Review Essay." *GLQ 2* (1995), 282-283.
[64] Newton, 265.
[65] Newton, 39.
[66] Bergman, 96.
[67] Newton, 3.

representation of a space unharmed by HIV/AIDS nor a place that embodies an uncomplicated notion of what is "good and moral."

Raymond Williams has noted how "the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city is of the future."[68] It follows, for me, that retiring to "the country" in *Parting Glances* is less about recapturing some abstract ideal about what is good and moral and more about reaching back to touch what we have lost to HIV/AIDS, the dead and the ideals that they represent to us, getting in touch with our memories of the past before the advent of HIV/AIDS. The Fire Island of *Parting Glances* seems to be frozen in time. Until the end of the film, we only see Fire Island in fragments in a photo collage that hangs on Nick's wall and catch glimpses of it in Michael's flashbacks to the day that he and Nick played a prank on Douglas at his summer home on the island. The present-day sequence on Fire Island is filmed off-season, so that it appears abandoned and dead. Nick's journey to the island is shown in a brief montage sequence of him dressed in a t-shirt and leather jacket traveling by train and by ferry; these echo shots seen earlier in two on Michael's flashback sequences so that Nick's current journey is reminiscent of prior ones. It could even be seen as a journey backward in time to that idealized place, as once Michael comes and joins him on the beach, the present day shots are intercut with shots that we now recognize from Michael's flashbacks, thus co-mingling the past and present in a way that may resemble the confusions of time and place in the writings of Holleran and Wojnarowicz.

[68] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), 297.

The island is also invoked as the past in the use of Hollywood "Indian" iconography in the flashback sequences. Nick and Michael, dressed up in "Indian" drag, stage a siege of Douglas's home which they pretend is a fort on the Western frontier. Evoking the myth of the American frontier underscores the degree to which Fire Island is seen as an idealized lost refuge since the American frontier itself is often understood in just those terms for the "metropolitan discontents" who fled the East to find respite in a "virgin land" from the squalor and corruption of the new cities of the 1890s.[69] Williams also associates the country with the "feel of childhood," or a "delighted absorption in our own world, from which, eventually, in the course of growing up we are distanced and separated."[70] It is not surprising, then, that the filmmakers use this childish prank with its evocative iconography to suggest not a rural space as much as a "frontier," and the sense of loss and separation and need for refuge and connection that Michael and Nick feel in the wake of HIV/AIDS.

Fire Island comes to stand in for the past in *Parting Glances*, and in *Longtime Companion*, because, for so many, it represents the culture of sexual possibility that Crimp points to as the lost ideal which we mourn when we mourn the AIDS dead. It is very important to note, however, that *Parting Glances* does not seem to share the same sense of melancholia for that culture as do the men Crimp discusses. Rather than insist on the "abject repudiation" of the sexual past, here represented as Fire Island, the film evidences a certain nostalgia for it and the culture that gave rise to it. We may recall here

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[69] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 30.
[70] Williams, 297.

Cherniavsky's argument that a nostalgic longing for "lost communal plentitude" or the culture of sexual possibility—which, to be sure, is often romanticized—displaces strategies for survival.

I remain unconvinced of this. It seems perfectly possible to maintain a nostalgic attachment to pre-AIDS sexual culture while remaining fully committed to strategies for continued survival. In response to such a concern, I want again to quote Williams, "Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent; only other men's [sic] nostalgias offend."[71] We may also recall Hart's insistence that AIDS films evidence a nostalgia for an idealized "time of respectability that lacks antisocial and/or immoral behavior."[72] This simply does not seem to apply to *Parting Glances*. On the contrary, the culture of sexual possibility which Fire Island has become a primary example of existed in tension with and often in opposition to this cluster of heteronormative ideals and acceptable forms of association and morality. Nick is a rebel, and just as he is not romanticized for his respectability and moral character—nor was Don Juan before him—Fire Island is not portrayed as an idealized past because of its heteronormative associations. The frontier in American mythology represents the boundary between civilization and wilderness. It is a line of demarcation beyond which lies a space which civilization has not colonized that is waiting to be explored. Because it is unmapped, it is dangerous yet exciting and full of unknown possibility. This is the kind of utopian space for which audiences of *Parting Glances* seem to express a nostalgia.

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[71] Williams, 12.
[72] Hart, 31.

RADICAL POETICS AND *LONGTIME COMPANION*

Like *Parting Glances*, *Longtime Companion*, has been read as an elegy. More specifically, it has been read in relation to the "revitalized role of the elegy as a vehicle for radical social criticism," although James Miller's analysis, as an extended engagement with the film and with elegy, needs no explanation as to why, since unlike Watney, he explains that for us.[73] Miller compares what he refers to as the "anastatic moment" of lyric poetry and other cultural productions to examine the ways in which "heaven" in the wake of AIDS has been rethought. The "anastatic moment" in elegy represents the resolution of the struggle of the bereaved in trying "to make sense of death, what they have lost to it, in opposition to the easy consolations" offered elsewhere.[74] In AIDS elegies, he notes that the anastatic moment coincides with the "blessed moment of recovery of when the dead rise from their mass graves."[75] This is the same climactic "welcome return of the dead" discussed by Zeiger as an alternative to the nuptial moment of traditional elegy which is one reason why *Longtime Companion* fits so well within his discussion. Miller begins his analysis by discussing Fire Island in the works of Holleran, Randy Shilts, and Larry Kramer. Together their work constitutes what he calls the "Gay Old Testament."[76] The Fire Island of Holleran's pre-AIDS novel *Dancer From the Dance* (1978) is a sort of Eden, "an otherwordly resort lost in the heavy seas of nostalgia."[77] That image, however, is completely undercut by a number of the

[73] Miller, 266.
[74] Miller, 266.
[75] Miller, 266.
[76] Miller, 271.
[77] Miller, 268.

chroniclers of the AIDS crisis. Miller claims that the moral to Shilts's *And the Band Played On* (1987) is "Don't pick up trash on the beach," while Kramer's novel *Faggots* (1978), which reads like a "prophetic book for the Age of AIDS," makes the "thunderous revelation that Fire Island really was hell."[78] The importance of "New Testament" AIDS elegies for Miller lies in their ability to recreate a notion of "heaven." "Heaven," he argues, is "the telos of all poetic allegorizations of death and rebirth, it has been reinvented time and again by poets seeking to ground their personal experience of loss on a foundation of public hope for recovery" and resurrection.[79] The task of redefining heaven for Miller seems especially important since one of the most consistent images of gay male "paradise" over the preceding years had been so thoroughly decimated. The "beach at the end of all this," to quote again from Holleran's *Ground Zero*, can no longer be taken for granted; the Edenic seaside resort is now a tragic "shorescape of loss."[80]

Miller's analysis of *Longtime Companion* can best be understood within the context of "bearing witness" as I have described it. He discusses at length the final scene, insisting that it is neither a simple "bourgeois salvation fantasy" nor a "fairy-tale happy ending."[81] He argues, rather, that the filmmakers made the deliberate and "clearly liberal decision about the kind of pop-cultural heaven needed to sustain public hope in the wake of individual losses to the plague."[82] Like elegiac writing of the period, the film seeks to redefine "heaven" and in so doing revise understandings of social relations and values

[78] Miller, 270.
[79] Miller, 267.
[80] Holleran, 219; Miller, 291.
[81] Miller, 302.
[82] Miller, 302.

and influence the creation of cultural memories of HIV/AIDS. *Longtime Companion*, however, unlike other elegies, refuses to accept that those most directly impacted by HIV/AIDS are somehow morally responsible for the epidemic. It also negates the separatist impulse of some elegies. "Straights," Miller writes, "simply do not figure in the resurrection of the dead imagined by the Fire Island psalmists."[83] Yet in the film's inclusion of the character of Lisa (Mary-Louise Parker), the "straight Fate," especially in the final scene, the film works to undermine the strict division between straight/gay and risk group/general population that dominates so much of the discourse of HIV/AIDS. *Longtime Companion* also points to, as does the life and poetry of Michael Lynch, the importance of AIDS activism. Miller points out, in fact, that Lisa is the first character to volunteer for AIDS work and the first to articulate "Lynch's radical poetic argument that AIDS activism may be the best long-term consolation during the crisis" in the course of the film.[84] Her presence in the final scene helps "build a bridge of sympathy" between the gay men who have born the brunt of the epidemic and the "mainstream" audience who as part of the "general population" are encouraged to see the epidemic from a different vantage point.

Bart Beaty argues that the "personal focus" of *Longtime Companion* "relentlessly distracts its audience from the pressing need for collective action on the political front."[85] This is not an unusual complaint about American melodrama or AIDS films. Roy Grundmann and Peter Sacks, for example, argue that *Philadelphia* like all melodrama

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[83] Miller, 293.
[84] Miller, 303.
[85] Bart Beaty, "The Syndrome is the System: A Political Reading of *Longtime Companion*," in *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992), 121.

attempts to offer "personal narratives" about pressing social issues in "clearly-defined moral terms."[86] By allowing Beckett's victory in court to coincide with his death, the film "depoliticizes" its own sociopolitical implications. They suggest that because the film is fundamentally liberal and manages to side-step the most condemning aspects of the AIDS crisis, the film is a "welcome object for the straight critic" but "leaves gay critics in an impossible position," politically obligated to engage with the film while personally compelled to want to look away.[87] Beaty criticizes *Longtime Companion* on similar grounds. It does not interrogate the "system" nor does it encourage the viewer to engage in the type of political protest that would dismantle the "system." For Beaty, the resurrection fantasy of *Longtime Companion*'s finale "not only silences the discussion of activism. It denies the need for it."[88] It does so in spite of the fact that the characters are talking about the critical need for AIDS activism in this very scene because, according to Beaty, the "realist form privileges images over words" and the image denies the existence of a coherent, uncommodified resistance.[89] What is interesting to me about the final scene of *Longtime Companion* is how it attempts to articulate a nostalgia for the pre-AIDS past while also sustaining an activist impulse. These arguments about the inherently domesticating effects of melodramatic or realist conventions—that they always recontain disruption or privilege the image over sound—are much less interesting in this context. Beaty problematically asserts that *Longtime Companion* absolves the

[86] Roy Grundmann and Peter Sacks, "*Philadelphia*," *Cineaste* 20.3 (Apr 1994), 51.
[87] Grundmann and Sacks, 55.
[88] Beaty, 119.
[89] Beaty, 119.

viewer of any responsibility in regards to the AIDS crisis by confirming that we can simply "wish away death."[90]

I call this conclusion problematic for several reasons. First, it is questionable because the fantasy is revealed as precisely that, a *fantasy*, when it is quickly replaced by the dismal reality of Fire Island in 1988. The wish is undone immediately after it is granted, making the ending perhaps even more bitter than had we never caught a glimpse of "the beach at the end of all this" at all. By breaking its consolatory promise after making it, the film seems explicitly to object to the idea that death can simply be wished away. Second, the welcome return of the dead in AIDS literature and film has a wide range of functions, not just as consolation, and when it comes to HIV/AIDS, there are no simple consolations. Third, it is questionable because it mistakes the author's own inability to reconcile mourning and militancy, or activist and other responses to AIDS—which are not, by definition, mutually exclusive—as an effect of the film's privileging of nostalgic fantasy over angry militancy. Beaty argues that *Longtime Companion* is a reactionary film masquerading as a progressive one because it fails to disrupt the conventions of American realism and thus neglects to challenge the narcissistic identification that it supports.[91] In the same way that Gundmann and Sacks argue that *Philadelphia* is not for a gay audience, Beaty argues that the film "is clearly not for the Gay Community but about the Gay Community."[92] A hegemonic and depoliticized sense

[90] Beaty, 120.
[91] Of course, Beaty's argument, to the extent that it assumes the ideal of a gay identity (i.e., "Gay Community') unified under the banner of an unproblematic radical politics, could also be accused of failing to question narcissistic forms of identification.
[92] Beaty, 117.

of sexual, gender, racial, and class identity—all of which provide the support needed for the AIDS crisis to continue unabated—is consolidated in opposition to the marked Others of the film. So goes the "political" reading offered by Beaty, but what interests me, is that it is because of, not in spite of, its reliance on "realism" that others, like Don Shewey, find the film to be valuable.

BEARING WITNESS AND AFFECT

It would be wrong to think of the impulse to "bear witness" as somehow solely locatable within the film as Miller seems to suggest. Rather, it is a way of comprehending and understanding that Watney, Miller, and others have applied to AIDS films. Reading Shewey's article on *Longtime Companion*, "In Memory of My Feelings," makes this more clear. The title of the essay evokes both the importance and difficulty of memory and affect in the wake of HIV/AIDS. It suggests the emotional numbing that results from experiencing the onslaught of death and multiple loss caused by AIDS. Emotional numbing leaves one hollow, empty, and with only a vague recollection of what it used to be like to feel anything at all. The title also suggests the importance of recovering affect. It announces what is to come as an ode, a memorial, a kind of testimony to memories and feelings of loss. For Shewey, it seems that these feelings are important to recognize, clarify, and communicate because they are the potential source of countercultural memories of HIV/AIDS. Facing the numbing effects of multiple losses and the antipathy of a homophobic culture which refuses gay men a forum in which to mourn publicly their losses, the author looks for a way to make the world meaningful by opening up a space for affect.

What Shewey finds significant is not the vision of paradise offered in the finale. The final scene of *Longtime Companion* breaks with the historical realism of the rest of the film, which may be why Shewey does not address it here. His concern—to the disdain of Beaty, I am sure—is with the film's verisimilitude. He reflects on the historical "accuracy" and emotional resonance of certain scenes, situations, character exchanges, or other details, looking to discover how and why these become meaningful given his own experiences of the epidemic. He writes that the film "incorporates dozens of details of living with AIDS that will provide a shock of recognition to those who share the experience and an education to those who don't."[93] It is in these details that the author thinks the film can both validate a different version of the AIDS epidemic and also build a bridge to a "mainstream" audience who likely does not share the same experiences.

The film chronicles the experience of AIDS for gay men in New York in the 1980s, the "denials . . . the speculation about friends' sex lives . . . the anxiety . . . the miracle-searching . . . and especially the main fact of life for people involved with AIDS—the hospital."[94] For Shewey, the film's power is in its ability to evoke the subjective experiences of living with the epidemic. The "most disturbing and truthful scene" is Sean's (Mark Lamos) death scene with his lover David (Bruce Davidson) at his side.[95] Sean is in the advanced stages of AIDS and the physical and emotional suffering is almost inconceivable. He mutters "Let's go" to David one day while he and the nurse

[93] Don Shewey, "In Memory of My Feelings," *Film Comment* 26.3 (May-June 1990), 14.
[94] Shewey, 14.
[95] Shewey, 13.

are changing Sean's sheets. David asks the nurse to leave, sits at Sean's bedside and tells him, "It's ok, you can let go," then starts to repeat, "Let go," until Sean passes away. Shewey has this to say about this scene: "My own experience is that he says this about 300 times; the scene seems to last half an hour. My toes are curling and uncurling in my shoes. I think I'm going to start screaming. I'm going to have to leave the room."[96] In addition to capturing these subjective details, the film's representational strategies lend them an even greater affective capacity. It is, in particular, the use of the long take that carries emotional weight for Shewey. "Rene lets many of the weighty, confusing emotions surrounding AIDS surface in long silent takes."[97] Shewey argues that the film's use of these strategies produces in him a "recognition," "waves of emotion, a reunion with feelings from the past. It's a profound version of nostalgia."[98]

He shares with the reader the reason for his emotional response, this sense of recognition. "'Let's go!' Bob used to say that to me."[99] Bob is the friend that Shewey nursed during the last six months of his life before dying of AIDS-related causes. That experience filled him with "feelings of love, disgust, horror, fear, and anger that are almost as raw now as they were then."[100] The author links this experience of reliving past emotional experiences to what he calls "AIDS consciousness" which has shaped his life experience and his experience of viewing film.[101] He remarks that his attitude toward deathbed scenes in general has changed since AIDS started claiming the lives of friends.

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[96] Shewey, 13.
[97] Shewey, 15.
[98] Shewey, 11.
[99] Shewey, 13.
[100] Shewey, 14.
[101] Shewey, 12.

What used most often to seem contrived and calculated can now "involuntarily" carry him "through a nauseating tunnel of memory-soaked electrons to the emergency room" where he watched helplessly as his friend was dying.[102] Shewey discusses projecting this "AIDS consciousness" onto other films and how his understanding of his own reactions become more clear when he does so. His highly emotional reaction to Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) surprised him until he made connections between his own experience of dying friends with those in the film and made connections between the soldier's experience of the war in Vietnam to his own experience of AIDS in New York City. The theme in *Born on the Fourth of July* that Vietnam divided a "country against itself applies to AIDS" as does the message that people "can be callous and unconcerned about other people's losses."[103]

Each of these observations underscores for me the importance of "In Memory of My Feelings" as a kind of bearing witness to the epidemic. Shewey seeks to elucidate the film, but more than that, he writes in order to understand his own social and emotional realities and in order to memorialize his lost friends and to inscribe their story and his own experiences into the cultural memories of HIV/AIDS. He uses the film to communicate his understanding of his experience at the same time that he protests against the cruelty and indifference of the larger social world. What I am arguing, in effect, is that "In Memory of My Feelings" makes more explicit some of the viewing tactics implicit in the notion of viewing AIDS films as bearing witness. Like other instances of testimonial writing about AIDS, Shewey seeks to place himself in history and uses the

[102] Shewey, 12.
[103] Shewey, 12.

past to understand his own present historical moment. He recounts his own past but in order to get at something beyond his own personal suffering. He does this by confronting his loss and clarifying its significance. Implicit in his writing is the assumption that "AIDS consciousness" is shared, and the needs, desires, and self-definitions it brings along with it need to have room to be articulated within the discourses of HIV/AIDS. In suggesting that "AIDS consciousness" is something the viewer projects onto the experience of a film in a way that reveals new interpretations, Shewey helps highlight the ways in which the film's meanings are not fully formed and inherent to the film no matter what the circumstances of its production and reception. Rather, those meanings emerge as part of the interaction between the viewer and, in this case, *Longtime Companion*.

THE *PHILADELPHIA* STORIES

I have tried to suggest throughout this chapter that a dialectical relationship exists between the AIDS crisis and our experience of identity, memory, and place and that examining these relationships is critical in order to understanding how AIDS films are used in the process of coming to terms with the AIDS crisis. Nowhere does this become clearer than in Rob Baker's book, *The Art of AIDS*.

The history of gays and lesbians in Philadelphia is long and rich. Marc Stein chronicles the people, places, and politics that make up that history in *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972*. According to the author, some of the first gay and lesbian political demonstrations occurred in Philadelphia, some of the most widely read gay and lesbian publications originated there, and Philadelphia always seemed to be at the forefront of "innovative politics"—the homophile movement,

gay sex radicalism, multicultural gay liberation, and black lesbian feminism all thrived there.[104] Still, Stein suggests that Philadelphia has, in many ways, become a "forgotten city": "Often referred to as the 'birthplace of the nation,' Philadelphia seemed to symbolize the past, not the present or the future."[105] Philadelphia in Baker's narrative, too, comes to represent the past.

Baker dedicates a chapter entitled "Being in Philadelphia" to analyzing *Philadelphia*. This is followed by an "interlude" entitled "Another Philadelphia Story," a deeply personal account of living with HIV/AIDS while in the city of Philadelphia. He concludes the interlude with a passage that suggests just how much the film resonates with him: "When Jonathan Demme named his AIDS movie *Philadelphia*, I knew exactly what he meant."[106] The connection between AIDS and the city, in his own mind, is "staggering."[107] Baker offers a positive, at times even glowing, evaluation of the film that needs to be explained. Gundmann and Sacks have the difficult task of having to account for how an openly gay screenwriter could pen a film as homophobic as they claim *Philadelphia* to be. To get around this, they pathologize Nyswaner, claiming that more than anyone, he "embodies *Philadelphia*'s neurosis" and has obviously been "completely assimilated within the power structure of Hollywood."[108] How do we understand Baker's response to the film without coming to the spurious conclusion that

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[104] Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (U of Chicago P, 2000), 386.
[105] Stein, 17.
[106] Rob Baker, *The Art of AIDS* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 29.
[107] Baker, 270.
[108] In part, the authors are taking Nyswaner to task for his attitude toward the gay "detractors" of the film. A number of his comments to the press after *Philadelphia*'s release were sometimes understood to be unnecessarily dismissive and arrogant. See, for example, "The 'Philadelphia' Scribe Fights Back," *The New York Times* 23 Jan 1994, sec.2: 4.

he must simply be as "neurotic" and "assimilated" as Nyswaner is argued to be? The solution to the dilemma comes from understanding how identity, memory, and place come to bear on his engagement, and in fact *all* engagements, with AIDS films. Baker's "interlude" offers much insight into his analysis.

The "other" story, the author's own, begins with Baker and his lover Peter leaving the "filth and tensions" of twenty years of life in New York City behind as they head to Philadelphia hopeful and wanting to start over.[109] Philadelphia to them represents many things: decency, self-respect, tolerance, acceptance, inclusiveness, health, and safety. It's the "city of brotherly love" after all. The "scene," the gay bars in Philadelphia, seem less "cliquish" and more friendly, and as Peter's health starts to deteriorate, they offer Baker a "way out of this slow-building nightmare."[110] Still, Philadelphia is a harmonious place in Baker's mind, where the homeless, for example, are cared for and where racial and ethic groups are respected. Room even exists for political "radicals" in Philadelphia with very few incidents of hate, fear, or crime, although these do occur. "We were happy in Philadelphia," he writes in the past tense.[111] Indeed, in a lot of ways, they "had it all" as the saying goes, an affordable downtown apartment, close friends, well-paying jobs, and many activities to keep them busy. Then one day "this intruder" takes it all away.[112] Peter starts to suffer from fevers, night sweats, swollen glands, dental problems, and weight loss. He undergoes a grueling series of tests and the doctors finally conclude that while Peter does not have full-blown AIDS, his condition is AIDS-related and his

[109] Baker, 27.
[110] Baker, 28.
[111] Baker, 28.
[112] Baker, 29.

prospects for getting better are bleak. Baker writes, "[m]aybe, I thought, we should go away again" and plans a trip for the two of them to Cancun, but there is no way out.[113] Peter's health continues to deteriorate and the couple is forced to return to Philadelphia early and eventually move back to New York to be near Peter's family. Toward the end of the chapter, he writes: "We left Philadelphia, which we had loved, where we had been happy, but where love and happiness—and even decency and tolerance—had not been enough," and follows this with the remark that he and the film's director, Jonathan Demme, seem to share the same idea of what Philadelphia means.[114] Baker dedicates the book to Peter La Bella who died in 1987.

It is interesting to me that Baker equates watching the film with "being in" the city of the title. His analysis of the film refers ahead to his own story of "being in" Philadelphia in the middle of an epidemic in a number of ways. Baker acknowledges that Demme sets for himself a rather modest goal, to portray homophobia and the fear of HIV/AIDS as "terribly believable" and "identifiable" for the "film going public" in order to provide the audience "an education in tolerance" through their proxy, Joe Miller.[115] Demme, Baker repeatedly assures us, is a conscientious and honest filmmaker who tackles the problem of AIDS discrimination, and a host of other issues, directly, from a "humanist" perspective, without being sensationalistic or morbid. The much-discussed aria scene works for Baker in this context because it "underscores the same universal promises of love overcoming sorrow" and marks a turning point between Beckett and

[113] Baker, 28.
[114] Baker, 29.
[115] Baker, 22-23.

Miller as now "something is understood, a shared decency, a sense of conscience."[116] Also, to its credit, according to Baker, *Philadelphia* portrays Beckett with an incredible strength and goes to great pains to point out that loving and supportive families can exist. Baker discusses how Demme's team sought out local AIDS activists and used them in the film making *Philadelphia*, one of the first mainstream films to even nod in the direction of AIDS activism. The film confronts death and grief "head on, neither avoiding it nor romanticizing it," letting Beckett die with "dignity and self-respect, surrounded by friends and family who love him."[117] (25). Finally, where Grundmann and Sacks see the "rampant misappropriation of gay culture," Baker sees a complex and savvy intertextuality that pays homage to New York AIDS artists and activists such as Juan Botas, Michael Callen, Karen Finley, Jack Smith, and Ron Vawter.[118]

A very subtle, though manifest, criticism of the failings of the "system" is here for the viewer to see in relation to both Peter's story and *Philadelphia*. Like his own experience in Philadelphia, love and happiness, even decency and tolerance, are "not enough" in *Philadelphia*. Peter, like Andrew Beckett, still dies in the end. Similarly, Baker points out that the lyrics to the songs used to open and close the film—Bruce Springsteen's "Streets of Philadelphia" and Neil Young's "Philadelphia"—are both "keenly attuned to the inherent ironies" of the setting.[119]

Operating in the text is an even more interesting, though latent, critique, however. Baker writes about the MOVE bombings in Philadelphia in the 1980s, standing on his

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[116] Baker, 20-21.
[117] Baker, 25.
[118] Grundmann and Sacks, 55.
[119] Baker, 26.

balcony and watching the flames rise as entire city blocks are destroyed at the order of the Mayor, and how it was almost impossible to believe that this could happen anywhere, let alone happen in Philadelphia. Both the film *Philadelphia* and the image of the city of Philadelphia conjure liberal, humanist ideals of harmony, dignity, respect, and inclusiveness. Actually "being in" the city, however, forces one to confront all of the ways in which those ideals fail. The connections between the MOVE bombings and the AIDS crisis may, by now, be obvious. Perhaps unwittingly, Baker, like so many others, suggests that the image of a "bomb" is a metaphor for the AIDS crisis. By invoking the memories of the MOVE bombings, he constructs an image of a city prepared to undermine its own "universal" ideals and, quite literally, destroy itself in order to rid itself of those it deems harmful "outsiders." This image—much like the rhetoric of AIDS activists struggling for AIDS prevention and treatment—works to expose the hypocrisy regarding which citizens are afforded the rights and benefits of liberal, humanist American ideology. This is arguably also, of course, the major premise of *Philadelphia*. The promise of the city—the universal ideals of love, tolerance, etc.—is not only not enough, it is wiped out.

Moreover, both the MOVE bombings and AIDS crisis are boundary crises. The border between normative/mainstream and disruptive/radical politics and identities has been crossed and that border needs to be repaired through the elimination of the disruption at whatever cost. The message behind the responses to each is quite clear: "You are not welcome here." Feeling the need to get away, Baker takes his partner Peter on a vacation to Cancun, but the trip is a disaster and Peter's health worsens. The trip

only "intensified the nightmare."[120] The devastating implication here is that not only is no space in the city left for Peter, but also no escape. Similarly, Beckett leaves the comfort and closeness of his suburban family home to return to the city because he comes to see it as a retreat, and he no longer has the luxury of escape. At the same time that HIV/AIDS is an internal threat to the city and all that it believes itself to represent, HIV/AIDS in Baker's story is an "intruder" that enters into the space of his and Peter's lives causing that space to contract until finally it disappears. HIV/AIDS destroys the only place that he and Peter ever found comfortable or welcoming. Peter leaves Philadelphia and ultimately dies, much like Beckett in the film, because no room is left for him.

This is the same unmistakable theme in Holleran and Wojnarowicz: HIV/AIDS can destroy the spaces of gay memories and identities. Baker, like these other authors, works to honor and preserve whatever remnants of his past that he can. *Philadelphia* enacts a similar contraction of space, which may be another reason why Baker identifies so closely with the film. It opens with sweeping overhead shots of the expansive city, then draws in closer to the busy city streets and multicultural neighborhoods. The emphasis in the beginning is on coexistence, openness, and movement. The film increasingly accentuates tight shots of immobility and isolation within the various claustrophobic spaces that constrict Beckett's life as his health begins to deteriorate. The spaces in which he lives steadily grow more disconnected, oppressive, and small—the

[120] Baker, 29.

office, library, the courtroom, the witness stand, the hospital bed, and finally, only the small screen on which the nostalgic images of Beckett's childhood are projected.

Hart tends to see the movement from the city to the various rural (or suburban) spaces and back as ideologically suspect as it essentially eradicates gays from the spaces defined as "good and moral." I argue in relation to both *Parting Glances* and *Longtime Companion*, as "homosexual AIDS melodramas" with gay pre-texts, Fire Island is not so much an image of the "good and moral" counterposed to the deviant and contaminated spaces of the city as much as it is an image of the past as the culture of sexual possibility. *Philadelphia*, as a "heterosexual AIDS melodrama" with a familial pre-text, displaces the notion of the past as defined by the culture of sexual possibility for a past defined by an idealized notion of childhood. This narrative strategy situates AIDS not as a problem confronting urban gays but as problem impinging on the nuclear family. For Cherniavsky, this return to the family always necessarily encourages an affective investment of the "lost world" of heteronormative gender and sexual identity, here through the reinscription of Beckett within familial reproductive ideology. In a way, it is not surprising that *Philadelphia* invokes childhood; analogies between rural spaces, the past, and childhood are common for reasons suggested by Williams. Clearly, the affective investment in Baker's text, however, is not in some notion of lost childhood innocence that existed prior to the emergence of "homosexuality" as Cherniavsky argues. His primary attachment is to the idealized Philadelphia of his recollections and all that he associates with it: Peter, home, the "gay scene," happiness, fear, the "bomb," a love and tolerance that are "not enough," the "ironies" inherent in the promise of the city. These

memories, no longer merely personal, enable an interpretation of both the film and the present historical moment and also the reinterpretation of the past.

The similarities between Baker's own story and *Philadelphia* are not simple parallels. Rather, Baker reads his past through *Philadelphia* and views the film through his own experience of the city. As Struken reminds us, "cinematic representations of the past have the capacity to entangle with personal and cultural memory."[121] It is difficult, after reading *The Art of AIDS*, not to view *Philadelphia* though the lens of Rob Baker and Peter La Bella's story. That, of course, is exactly Baker's point in writing it. Baker writes his personal memories into the cultural narrative about HIV/AIDS by "bearing witness" to the AIDS crisis and making them public. As testimony, it attempts to intervene in the production of cultural memories about HIV/AIDS in a number of ways. Baker seeks to make a record of his dead lover Peter. Like Shewey, Baker reveals just how entangled with AIDS films those memories are. He memorializes Peter and does so through his engagement with *Philadelphia*. At the same time, his understanding of *Philadelphia* is filtered through his recollections of Peter and living with AIDS in Philadelphia. He tries to make sense of this "mysterious new disease" and the death of Peter by continually exploring them, discussing their implications, finding ways of dealing with the ironies, ambiguities, and anxieties that they provoke. He makes sense of HIV/AIDS and Peter's death by looking for commonalties between the experiences shared with Peter and the experience of viewing *Philadelphia*. Each informs and revises memories of the other. He makes life now meaningful by facing his grief and trying to

[121] Sturken, 11.

make connections with grieving others while also voicing his protest against the world that allowed AIDS to take Peter and destroy the promise of the city. HIV/AIDS has shaken his faith in love, decency, tolerance, acceptance. They are simply no longer enough. He makes sense of HIV/AIDS by representing them as an invasive force. HIV is an intruder into an otherwise privileged existence. It enters the picture and the social landscape begins to shrink until they finally find themselves exiled.

CONCLUSION: NOSTALGIA AND/AS UTOPIAN LONGING

HIV/AIDS literally destroys the places where identities and memories take shape and are lent meaning. Hence the longing evident in so many AIDS narratives, including AIDS films, for a return to an idealized place, state, and time. The familiar, nostalgic, "once we had it all," quality of numerous AIDS narratives discussed by John Clum is certainly operative in many of the texts discussed throughout this chapter. "There is no need for more depictions of loss and grief. There is no longer time for nostalgia for 'the time before the war,' which is receding farther into the past."[122] Obviously, Clum sees this longing as objectionable. While his observations about the racial and socioeconomic assumptions and erasures enacted by AIDS narratives are certainly important, and certainly need continually to engage our fantasies for the future in such a way, still, that AIDS narratives had less to say about race and class does not seem to be reason enough to dismiss images of loss and grief entirely. I would argue that AIDS films are critical at this juncture precisely because they depict images of longing, loss, and grief. This

[122] John M. Clum, "'And Once I Had It All': AIDS Narratives and Memories of an American Dream," in Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, eds. *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 221.

longing had hardly even been fully articulated and the work of mourning it points to had barely even begun. Nonetheless, there seems to be at least three reasons to dismiss nostalgia that we need to consider. The first reason is that it is simply regressive. It evidences a disengagement from the present and a turn away from the future. The second objection is that it is also distorting. Nostalgia, at best, offers dubious version of an over-simplified past. The third is that nostalgia indicates a retreat from more properly political understandings of HIV/AIDS. If Williams is right that nostalgia is inevitable, it is critical that we understand why it emerges when it does, what it means, and how it functions as a response to the AIDS crisis as a cultural crisis.

Nostalgia is a kind of "utopian longing." In fact, Muñoz rejects the idea that queer utopian remembrance is even commensurate with nostalgia. It is, rather, a kind of critical recollection animated by "a force field of affect and political desire."[123] The political work of utopian longing is to trace different "networks of commonality" and identify the "structures of feeling" that move us beyond our present constraints. Nostalgia, then, has both affective and political intentions. Still, it is no more or less innocent, interested, or distorting than other forms of remembering. As Sturken points out, *all* memory is an "object of desire" formed at a later time in a "tangle" of fact and fiction. Nostalgia makes no claims to historical accuracy. There always is an awareness that there is no "way it was." Nostalgia, though, makes it possible for us to name what matters, identify what about the present is lacking, specify what should be different, and

[123] Muñoz, 357.

rehearse what "can and perhaps will be." In this way, nostalgia may actually be a desire for a future.

Nostalgia is intimately bound up with how we experience place. Edward Relph discusses the historical and etymological roots "nostalgia." The term was first coined in the seventeenth century to identify a medical condition that included a whole array of symptoms including a preoccupation with thoughts of home. It was believed through the eighteenth century that this illness could result in death if the patient could not be taken home. For Relph, this signifies that "the importance of attachment to place was once well-recognized."[124] Nostalgia, it would seem stems from a sense of rootlessness, from a "detached sense of moorings" as Schecter says. At the same time, the places to which we are the most attached can easily become "oppressive and imprisoning." In the sixteenth century, it was believed that being confined to one place would result in "melancholy."[125] Nostalgia and melancholy, both responses to places, are in tension with one another and any clear-cut distinction between them often becomes difficult.

Here I want to recall the quote from Crimp that I used at the outset of this essay, specifically his reference to the two different kinds of melancholia. The first is a profound sense of loss accompanied by feelings of shame that results in the abject repudiation of prior attachments and desires. The second is the kind of melancholia he felt: the overwhelming loss experienced when facing the disappearance of a place which he called home and of the culture that had for so long defined his self of self and sense of responsibility. He cannot mourn the demise of that culture he tells us. Rather, he

[124] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 41.
[125] Relph, 41.

sustains and nurtures that image and the feelings that accompany it and let them inform his politics. The melancholia that Crimp is "suffering" from is, more properly, nostalgia, or better still, "utopian longing."

The difficulty we have in distinguishing between nostalgia and other forms of remembrance—melancholy or the more properly psychoanalytic condition of melancholia—is because our experiences of place are transient and continually alternating between the "need to stay" and the "desire to escape."[126] These are major motifs in AIDS films and the reception literature: Nick and Robert needing to leave New York but deciding to stay in *Parting Glances* (which, in the end, is really a comedy of departures and arrivals); Greg's ghost escaping heaven to warn Nick to hang on to life on earth in *Parting Glances*; Sean's death scene ("let's go") and the resurrection in *Longtime Companion*; Beckett's retreat to the suburbs and his return to the city in *Philadelphia*; Shewey's escape to the movies and his involuntary "reunion with feelings" from the past; and Baker's retreat to Cancun, his return to the city, and his ultimate expulsion. These longings to escape and to remain, however, if satisfied, can also have unintended effects. Specifically, the need to stay quickly yields to a feeling of imprisonment (melancholy) and the desire to escape results in a sense of being uprooted (nostalgia). This slippage between the "need to stay" and the "desire to escape" shapes our subjectivities, our representations of the past, and our political response to HIV/AIDS. I am reminded here of a brief quote from Newton about what defines the residents of Cherry Grove. They are

[126] Relph, 42.

"caught in midflight between escape and nesting, between voluntary exile and the longing to belong."[127]

Utopian longings envision the past in order to imagine the present and the future as spaces "outside of heteronormativity." They endow cultural memories of HIV/AIDS with a hope for a better future. Throughout this chapter I have emphasized those utopian longings that remake the world and revision the past without giving in to the self-loathing encouraged by moralizing discourses of HIV/AIDS. These longings underscore the need to look at the history of HIV/AIDS without placing blame on those affected. They also search for ways of ways re-imagining commonality, intersubjectivity, and public life, often somewhere beyond sexual identities and HIV status. Watney calls "acts of memory" those memory texts that memorialize our losses and which attempt to "imagine the world as it might have been, if not for HIV." This has been the major contribution of AIDS films to cultural memories of HIV/AIDS.

[127] Newton, 7.

Chapter Six: "Together With These Nice Viewers at Lifetime": Made-For-Television Movies and Virtual Third Places

In the conclusion to *Watching Television: Hermeneutics, Reception and Popular Culture*, Tony Wilson notes that "of the theoretical tasks which remain," in the study of television audiences and viewing practices, "at least one is central: a detailed investigation into how people speak about their experience watching television, a scrutiny of discourses of viewing."[1] As Bob Hodge and David Tripp point out, discourse about television "is itself a social force" and viewers' talk about television is the "site of the mediation of television meanings."[2] It provides an "interface" between the viewer's own personal response to television and the social world. Ron Lembo has rightly suggested that understanding television requires that we explore more than just television content or even what and how viewers watch. He sees engaging television as a series of progressive steps, each needing to be examined. Why and how viewers turn to television, how they interact with it, when and why they leave it behind, and how they incorporate it back into their lives are all worthy of being studied.[3] One of the points I hope to get across in this chapter is that online talk about TV movies is one way that viewers fit television back into their lives in socially meaningful ways.

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[1] Tony Wilson, *Watching Television: Hermeneutics, Reception and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1993), 206.
[2] Bob Hodge and David Tripp, *Children and Television* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986), 143. Qtd. in Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 74.
[3] Ron Lembo, *Thinking Through Television* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 100.

Numerous authors began investigating viewer discourses about watching TV prior to Wilson's pronouncement and this line of inquiry continues. Relying on numerous methods and approaching the subject from an array of critical positions, media scholars have examined a range of viewer discourses about television: television fandom, for example, and viewer talk about dramatic programming, reality TV, soap operas, sitcoms, and, appropriately enough, talk shows. This chapter seeks to extend those discussions to the form of the made-for-television movie while linking them to the themes of the previous chapters, specifically, the relationship between visual media, public culture, and space and place. More precisely, this chapter discusses how online chat by Lifetime TV viewers in relation to the TV movie, *Any Mother's Son* (1997) is, for some, an integral part of the viewing process and explores what these sites of the mediation of television meaning may reveal about public life in the present historical moment.

TV movies have been a privileged if troubled television form for the representation of gays and lesbians on television. Larry Gross, for example, once remarked that since television seems only able to represent gays and lesbians as a social problem, if it represents them at all, "it is no surprise therefore that gay characters have been mostly confined to television's favorite problem of the week genre, the made-for-TV movie."[4] Moreover, it is not clear that TV movies about gays and lesbians are intended for a gay and lesbian audience. Elayne Rapping, for example, argues that the TV movie about a gay man who has contracted HIV/AIDS and decides to come out to his family, *An Early Frost* (NBC, 1985), takes as it "real theme" not the "drama of coming out" but the "trauma" it

[4] Larry Gross, "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media," in *Gay People, Sex, and the Media*, Michelle A. Wolf and Alfred P. Kielwasser, eds. (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991), 31.

causes "to his traditional family" and is "not so much about coping with the disease from the victim's point of view as from the mother's."[5] Nonetheless, TV movies have been popular with gay and lesbian audiences.

Articles about *Serving in Silence: The Margarethe Cammermeyer Story* (NBC, 1995), a docudrama about the lesbian Colonel's struggle against discriminatory policies in the armed services; *What Makes a Family* (Lifetime, 2001), about the court battle of a lesbian mother to gain custody of her young daughter; *The Matthew Shepard Story* (NBC, 2001), a docudrama about the deadly beating of a young, gay man in Wyoming; and *Angels in America* (HBO, 2003), an adaptation of Tony Kushner's play about HIV/AIDS, were all cover stories for national gay and lesbian periodicals and were well-received in the gay and lesbian, if not always the mainstream, press. Charles Isherwood's article in *The Advocate* about the disappearance of "gay-themed" TV movies from broadcast network television, "Changing Channels," praises cable networks for producing such TV movies as *Breaking the Surface: The Greg Louganis Story* (USA, 1997), a biopic about the athlete's abusive relationship and struggle with HIV/AIDS; *Twilight of the Golds* (Showtime, 1997), a fictional TV movie about an expecting mother's struggle to decide if she will give birth to a son she knows will be gay; and *In the Gloaming* (HBO, 1997), which, like *An Early Frost*, dealt with a young man's coming out to his family as gay and HIV-positive. The article recounts the difficulties in getting the FOX network to broadcast *Doing Time on Maple Drive* (1992), a TV movie about a troubled suburban family being torn apart by divorce, alcoholism, and homosexuality, and discusses the lack

[5] Elayne Rapping, *The Movie of the Week: Public Stories/Private Events* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992), 102, 105.

of gay-themed TV movies in its wake despite its relative success (it was FOX's highest-rated TV movie to date).[6] A caption next to several stills from various TV movies dating back to *That Certain Summer* (ABC, 1972), a TV movie about a father who comes out as gay to his son, reads "OUR GAY ROOTS."[7] In spite of the troubled history of gay and lesbian representation in TV movies and the assumption on the part of some critics that TV movies are not made for gay and lesbian audiences, they continue to be a popular form with historical significance to gays and lesbians which is why I have chosen to focus on them here.

As the title of Ien Ang's book on television audiences, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, suggests, audiences, for a variety of reasons, have, historically, been difficult to identify and study. The television audience is, for example, geographically and temporally disbursed and they seldom "represent and organize themselves as 'we, the audience.'"[8] However, Nancy Baym has remarked that "even if one wanted to find a nicely bound, self-defined audience . . . it has been difficult. The Internet has changed that."[9] The internet has made TV viewers more visible to other viewers, along with researchers, producers, and advertisers, has enabled the proliferation of discourses about television, and has helped point to the social dimensions of television viewing. Moreover, John Hartley has suggested that if "the public can nowadays only be encountered in mediated form, it becomes necessary to look at those mediations to discover the state of

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[6] Charles Isherwood, "Changing Channels," *The Advocate* 18 Feb. 1997: 27.
[7] Isherwood, 29.
[8] Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 6.
[9] Nancy Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications), 2000, 19.

the contemporary public domain."[10] The Internet has become a major site where the audience emerges (perhaps paradoxically) as a public engaged in talk about TV, which explains its centrality to this chapter.

This chapter begins with a brief review of the literature on TV movies examining how others have evaluated both the form and their social significance. Significantly, what is lacking in these approaches is a focus on TV movie audiences. Paying closer attention to TV movie audiences would allow us to understand better the social significance of this type of television programming. Next, I examine the idea of the "TV movie as a public sphere" offered by Rapping in *Movie of the Week: Private Stories—Public Events*, suggesting that a reconsideration of the notion of a mass, undifferentiated audience which forms that sphere is necessary if we are to appreciate how viewers fit TV movies back into their lives. Significantly, the TV movies that Rapping discusses are all broadcast network productions. Currently, however, none of the broadcast networks regularly air TV movies. TV movies have a larger role to play on basic and premium cable channels where they are offered up to "niche" audiences than on the major networks. Therefore, it is also important to discuss how these industrial changes have impacted the TV movie and its audiences. Online bulletin boards and chat rooms are referred to in the industry as "enhanced viewing features."[11] Finally, I explore viewer responses to *Any Mother's Son* while trying to suggest how cross-media use provides a type of "interface" by which viewers negotiate their subject and social positions, form social bonds with others, and

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[10] John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of the Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.
[11] Louisa Ha, "Enhanced Television Strategy Models: A study of Television Websites," *Internet Research: Electronic Applications and Policy* 12.3 (2002): 235-247.

explore complex social issues, using Ray Oldenburg's notion of the "third place" as a starting point.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO TV MOVIES

Todd Gitlin is one of the early academic critics of American television to examine the TV movie at length in his *Inside Prime Time*. Most TV movies do not fare well under Gitlin's critical scrutiny for a number of reasons. Primarily, they are formulaic. He notes that the volume of TV movies being produced and aired in the 1980s, at the time that he was writing, had grown rapidly since the 1960s and now comprised a large percentage of the primetime schedule. This kind of demand for a product would certainly require that the networks and the producers who supplied them with original movies, much like the classical movie studios, develop production routines, but these routines are, from Gitlin's perspective, part of the problem. He traces the constraints placed on TV movies from the conceptual, to the development, and the production phases and argues that as a result, "TV movies become just another set of predictable interruptions in the series stream."[12] Gitlin insists that any producer should be able to "carve out some freedom from formula" given that the TV movie is less financially risky for the networks and less likely to alienate audiences because they are more transitory than television series, yet time and again TV movies fail to break free from the formula shaped by the industry.[13] For Gitlin, TV movie "gatekeepers" and certain business practices amount to forms of "direct censorship, self-censorship, and the censorship imposed by style and convention."[14] Even when a superior

[12] Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 159.
[13] Gitlin, 158.
[14] Gitlin, 187.

TV movie exceeds expectations, somehow manages to stretch the boundaries of the formula, and succeeds in addressing social concerns in an intelligent and forthright manner, conventionality reasserts itself and the industry returns to the standard, uninspired formula.

The TV movie formula insists that "characters should be simple and simply motivated, heroes familiar, stories full on conflict, endings resolved, uplift apparent, and each act should end on a note of suspense sufficient enough to carry the viewer through the commercial break."[15] For Gitlin, this formula has a simplifying, flattening effect.[16] The familiar characters and plots, the excessive use of close-ups, the low production values, and the poor quality of the TV image and sound results in the "diminishment of the social dimensions of things."[17] Even with technical improvements, however, the best TV movies "could probably never be as powerful emanating from the furniture—our minds occasionally drifting toward the familiar objects of the household, if toward anything at all, while we wait for the next commercial—as it appears when projected on the big screen."[18] Clearly Gitlin takes issue with the fact that TV movies are, simply put, "televisual," while he also questions the ability of audiences to connect with whatever "social comment" remains in a TV movie after it has been flattened out on the television assembly-line. While he seems to take TV movie producers to task for assuming that the audience is "uneducated, distracted, and easily bewildered," at least some of those same assumptions seem to underlie his own conception of TV movie viewers.

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[15] Gitlin, 165-166.
[16] Gitlin, 187.
[17] Gitlin, 188.
[18] Gitlin, 193

Critics such as Gitlin who are concerned about the ideological effects of television seem troubled by the tendency of TV movies to simplify, domesticate, and depoliticize complex social issues. He writes:

> This convention of the small, restricted, realistic story has ideological consequences. It has the effect of keeping the show compact, narrow, simplified. Indeed, coherence is defined as narrowness, and not just in the thinking of the writers but audiences, too. It is the dramatic aesthetic that prevails in this culture. Such conventions are shared, not imposed. When they are shared long enough and hard enough, they harden into the collective second nature of a cultural style. True, against restriction there arises a counterrevolution based on audience identification with the normal.[19]

Gitlin's use of "realistic" here echoes back to what he calls "television realism" earlier in the chapter, a mode of representation that he argues depends on clarity, familiarity, and a mix of believability and sensationalism, which functions mostly as "light entertainment."[20] In suggesting that the TV movie audience seems inevitably drawn to the normal which is a manifestation of some kind of collective narrow-mindedness, he seems to want to shift the responsibility for the sorry state of TV movies from their producers to their viewers. They share the responsibility for the "low sensibility" of the TV movie.[21]

Against the tendency to view TV movies as a way of simply smoothing over social conflict and contradictions, Laurie Schulze suggests the possibility that they may "lay bare more. . .than they lay to rest," especially since they "respond to points of sociocultural strain" and drawn in the "socially marginalized."[22] These notions would seem to inform the approach that Rapping later takes in understanding TV movies as a kind of social

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[19] Gitlin, 175.
[20] Gitlin, 161.
[21] Laurie Schulze, "The Made-For-TV Movie: Industrial Practice, Cultural Form, Popular Reception," in *Television: The Critical View*, 5th ed., Horace Newcomb, ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 158.
[22] Schulze, 172.

intervention. For Schulze, this can happen because viewers are engaged in the process of "actively making meanings and pleasures from popular texts."[23]

Two tendencies in TV movies and TV movie audiences seem to trouble Gitlin the most, the valorization of the personal over the social in TV movies and the audience's need for the "familiar" and the "normal." Other critics have also suggested that TV movies narrate their stories in a personal or melodramatic register rather than the social. Rod Carveth, for example, has pointed out that more often than not, TV movies, in focusing on personal responses and solutions to social problems, actually fail to offer a legitimate social critique.[24] For him, TV movies are about restoring social order. Douglas Gomery echoes this in his study of *Brian's Song* (ABC, 1971) when he makes the point that TV movies fulfill a "particular cultural need: topical entertainment reaffirming basic values and beliefs."[25] Schulze points out that TV movies employ two different types of codes, the first fictive and the second referential. The TV movie's fictive codes are that of melodrama and, like other melodramas, TV movie narratives center on the concerns with the family and the domestic sphere.[26] This hardly means that the social is erased however. In addition to its fictional codes, TV movies rely on referential codes that link the fictional narrative to the "shape of the problem and its possible solutions assume in social reality."[27] Similarly Rapping emphasizes that TV movies seem to draw on two

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[23] Schulze, 173.
[24] Rod Carveth, "Amy Fisher and the Ethics of 'Headline' Docudramas," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21.3 (Fall 1993), 124.
[25] Douglas Gomery, "*Brian's Song*: Television, Hollywood, and the Evolution of the Movie Made for Television," in *American History, American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, John O'Connor, ed. (New York: Ungar Press, 1983), 217.
[26] Schulze, 172.
[27] Schulze, 169.

representational traditions, the first being melodrama and the second being "social realism." As a hybrid of these two strategies, TV movies tend to appeal to viewer sentiment and narrate those concerns within a sociological context.[28] Problems in TV movies are more accurately described as sociological than psychological according to Rapping, and while TV movie viewers are addressed as family members, the there is "no doubt that we are also being addressed as members of a social order being threatened."[29] Thus, although TV movies do situate the social within the context of the familial, domestic sphere, the social does not actually disappear from view. While these concerns with ideological containment in relation to TV movies are certainly valid, this is not the only way to understand the sociocultural significance of TV movies. In fact, for Rapping, for example, concerned as she is with oppositional discourse and politics, TV movies are important because they offer the opportunity to "educate and to move viewers against the grain of what seems to be the dominant value system."[30]

Within the framework of Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch's "cultural forum" model of television, "raising questions is as important as answering them."[31] In other words, how TV movies resolve a particular social dilemma is less important than having dramatized it in the first place because, no matter how unambiguous a cultural artifact may seem, it nonetheless opens up the possibility of multiple meanings and enables public discussion and debate. Furthermore, they make the point that those TV programs that

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[28] Rapping, 67-68.
[29] Rapping, 59.
[30] Rapping, 44.
[31] Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View*, 5th ed., Horace Newcomb, ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 513.

make the best use of the medium are those that structure themselves around the "rhetoric of discussion."[32] Certainly this is the case with most TV movies, which when dealing with social issues, more often then not, are explicit about their "pedagogical function."[33] That is, through textual and extratextual devices, television movies attempt to educate the audience in regards to the social issue being addressed. Schulze writes that the "pedagogical stance frequently adopted by the made-for-TV movie might have a similar domesticating function" as framing the issue as a family melodrama because it does "potentially working to pull the disturbing issue it takes up toward socially manageable limits. The problem can be understood, statistics cited, fictive representatives of professionals consulted, solutions spelled out, the issue reassuringly negotiated."[34] Or again, if we set aside the issue of ideological conclusions, we can recognize that TV movies have the potential to open a public dialogue, although the direction that dialogue will take cannot be predetermined.

Most often the pedagogical function of TV movies takes a dialogical form, making the forum/discussion aspect of television explicit. Alan Schindler's sister, Kathy, in *Any Mother's Son*, for example, has heated arguments with her mother and her aunt, systematically challenging every homophobic assumption they make about Allen and about being gay as they voice it. While these are family arguments taking place around the dining room table, they echo public debates about the social prejudices, inequalities, and injustices, and we are made aware of the social dimension of the issue at hand. One

[32] Newcomb and Hirsch, 508.
[33] Schulze, 167.
[34] Schulze, 168.

review of HBO's *In the Gloaming* (1997) claims that when compared with *An Early Frost*, "on the surface, things don't seemed to have changed much. . . . One significant change, though, is that *An Early Frost* was as much an instructional film as a drama."[35] The critic refers to the movie's instructional qualities because, again, the TV movie inscribes public discussions about HIV/AIDS within its narrative. Early in the movie, Michael (Aidin Quinn), the central character, is hospitalized with an opportunistic infection. The scene in the hospital opens on two nurses just down the hall from Michael's room. As the doctor approaches, one says to the other, "I don't want to go in there." As the doctor opens the door, he is angered by a sign that reads ISOLATION. As it turns out, the hospital staff has quarantined Michael against the doctor's wishes and no one has brought Michael his food. "Apparently," he says to Michael, "there is someone on the staff who hasn't heard my lecture." "What lecture?," asks Michael. "That you can't get AIDS just by being around someone who has it. That it's only transmissible through intimate sexual contact or blood." Or, for example, when the doctor says, "We've discovered that it's possible for someone to be a carrier of the disease without actually showing the symptoms," Michael reiterates the statement in the form of a simplified question: "You mean you can pass it on without actually getting it?" Or, later, Michael asks the doctor how he is going to live his life and tell people that he has the "gay plague." The doctor responds, "It's not just a gay disease, Michael. A virus doesn't know or care what your sexual preference is." According to *An Early Frost* co-scriptwriter, Ron Cowen, in an interview with Rodney

[35] David Bianculli, "AIDS-Themed 'In the Gloaming' Is Super," *Daily News* 17 Apr. 1997: 100.

Buxton, they wanted to "elicit compassion" and "put forth some medical information."[36] The intended audience for *An Early Frost* was the "typical viewing family," according to the movie's other scriptwriter, Dan Lipman.[37] As he explains it to Buxton, "yes, it's for the gay community, but it's basically for the people who know nothing about AIDS, who think that all gay people are fags and should die."[38]

Serving in Silence, another very popular TV movie which earned 14.6 rating and a 21 percent share (13.9 million households tuned in), sometimes forgoes the liberal pluralist rhetoric of discussion and negotiation between conflicting points of view on lesbians and gays in the military in favor of representing and valorizing the point of view of the protagonist in a way that encourages a single interpretation and discourages alternatives, what Hilary Hinds, writing about the British TV movie *Oranges Aren't the Only Fruit* (1990), refers to as the "illiberal strategy" of television.[39] This strategy of unequivocally privileging a lesbian perspective is part of what makes *Serving in Silence* such a potentially powerful intervention into public discourse about the issues of homophobia and gays and lesbians in the military, and so threatening to a homophobic perspective. In one scene, Cammermeyer is accosted by a husband and wife, clearly marked as uneducated, poor "white trash," that jump out of their pick-up truck to spit on her and shout that she is repulsive. Of course, it is not unproblematic that the movie reinforces one cultural stereotype in the service of challenging another, but it does

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[36] Rodney Allen Buxton, "Broadcast Formats, Fictional Narratives and Controversy: Network Television's Depiction of AIDS, 1983-1991," (Diss. U of Texas, 1992), 338.
[37] Buxton, 366.
[38] Buxton, 366-367.
[39] Hilary Hinds, "*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit:* Reaching Audiences Other Lesbian Texts Cannot Reach," in *New Lesbian Criticism*, Sally Munt, ed. (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 164.

illustrate how TV movies encourage viewers to take a stance in relation to social issues. No one would want to be on the side of ignorance and intolerance, especially when portrayed as so patently ugly. Brent Bozell, chairman of the right-wing Media Research Council, who claims in *The Washington Times* that "most of the real world considers the homosexual lifestyle repugnant and appalling," also writes that "a viewer not presented with the rationale for the ban may wonder why the Army would want to get rid of someone like this. Of course, there are plenty of good reasons why open gays and lesbians should be excluded, but 'Serving' asserts that only bigots would want to keep Grethe [sic] Cammermeyer out of the Army."[40] The Media Research Council declared *Serving in Silence* to be at the top of the list of "worst" programming in 1995.

Gitlin's position is that the TV movie "abhors what it considers polemic, didacticism, speechifying. Convention clamps a tight frame around the story. It doesn't want the larger public world leaking in. The soapbox is forbidden furniture."[41] Clearly, these examples demonstrate that that is not always, nor even mostly, the case. Significantly, *Serving in Silence* ends with an openly politicized speech from Cammermeyer at a gay and lesbian pride rally.

Through their representational strategies, TV movies do incorporate and address the social and political dimensions of life, even in ways that could be described as didactic. The social is brought to bear on TV movies in other ways as well. *An Early Frost* is clearly a domestic melodrama—a family must not only "cope" with the fact that their son is gay, but also with the fact that he has contracted a strange, new "disease"

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[40] Brent Bozell, "Barbara vs. the military maxim," *The Washington Times* 5 Feb. 1995: B4.
[41] Gitlin, 175.

called AIDS—and as such, we might argue that melodrama threatens to obscure the social dimensions of HIV/AIDS by positioning it as a fundamentally personal and domestic issue. *An Early Frost*'s status as a national, public event (earning a twenty-three rating and a thirty-three share)—due to a number of different factors including the controversial subject of AIDS, the advance publicity, and that it was chosen to air at 9 PM (ET) during the fall "sweeps," November 11, 1985—however, breaks the frame of the small and restricted, personal narrative altogether. We cannot separate the TV movie from the extratextual elements that surrounded it.

As is the case with many TV movies of the era, the network planned events in conjunction with the TV movie. NBC in cooperation with nationwide AIDS organizations distributed "viewer's guides" to hospitals and for the thousands of group "home screenings" to subdue public fears and alter public misconceptions about AIDS. Executives at NBC staged special screenings, which they offered as educational forums for their audiences, while AIDS organizations held fund-raisers that coincided with the broadcast. NBC news aired a special half-hour broadcast about AIDS immediately after the movie called *AIDS Fear/AIDS Fact*, hosted by Tom Brokaw, which *The Los Angeles Times* reported the program would "provide up-to-date information on what is know about acquired immune deficiency syndrome and what can be done to avoid getting it."[42] The same article quotes three different "AIDS specialists" who had each given *An Early Frost* a "thumbs-up" after viewing the movie at a special screening for 2,000 professionals associated with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (ATAS): "The film deals

[42] Robert Steinbrook, "Thumbs-Up From Doctors," *The Los Angeles Times* 11 Nov. 1985: 1.

realistically with some very serious issues . . . . The movie will motivate people to overcome their own anxieties about AIDS and get the information to make rational decisions."[43] Numerous articles appeared around the nation attesting to the validity of the television movie's representation of AIDS. The ATAS screening was described as a response to the fears of actors after the death of Rock Hudson, when members of the Screen Actors Guild voted that they be notified if a role they were asked to play required "open-mouth kissing scenes."[44] Because there had been "so much misinformation about AIDS in the motion picture agency," NBC agreed, at the academy's request, to stage the screening and invite health care professionals to answer any questions the audience may have about AIDS.[45] Thirty-second commercial spots featuring Gena Rowlands, who starred in the TV movie, advertised national telephone "hotlines" that were opened up to answer viewers' questions about AIDS, its symptoms, and its communicability.

Other "extended mediazations" of *An Early Frost* were not planned by the network but are equally important to understanding the TV movie. On November 23, 1985, for example, *The Washington Post* reported that five naval recruits had filed a restraining order against the US Navy to stop their dismissal for having tested HIV-positive. The front-page article reports that the recruits "said they had little counseling, no written information about the disease, no one to advise them whether they have any legal rights to stay in the service. A program on commercial television last week, *An Early Frost*, was the best bit of information any of them had about the quirks of the as-yet-incurable

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[43] Steinbrook, 1.
[44] Steinbrook, 1.
[45] Stephen Farber, "News Special on AIDS to Follow NBC Drama," *The New York Times* 5 Nov. 1985: C26.

disease."[46] On November 25, 1985, the *New York Times* reported that a group of high school students had begun "raising money for AIDS research and inviting speakers from the Gay Men's Health Crisis Center and the National Gay Task Force to speak at their school."[47] Searching for an explanation for their activism, the journalist remarks that they "all knew about Rock Hudson and many of them had seen *An Early Frost* on television."[48] These extratextual materials, in conjunction with the movie's pedagogical function, helped shape *An Early Frost*'s social role.

Ultimately, as these various examples demonstrate, the personal and familial frame placed around *An Early Frost* was expanded by the public events that reframed HIV/AIDS as a national story of collective fear, intolerance, and ignorance. What I have been discussing are what John Thompson refers to as the processes of discursive elaboration (people talking about media in their everyday lives) and extended mediazation (when certain media messages are used as the basis for new media messages).[49] Both make the type of ideological analysis that attends only to the program at hand problematic. The point here is not that it requires these types of discursive elaborations and extended mediazations to overcome the limitations of the conventional TV movie narrative, only that they are inevitable and integral to how viewers fit TV into their lives. Still, even within each TV movie, to the degree that it incorporates the "rhetoric of discussion," it introduces the possibility of the social. The TV movie's pedagogical stance and its

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[46] Chris Spolar, "Recruits Fault Naval AIDS Policy," *The Washington Post* 23 Nov. 1985: A1.
[47] Ron Alexander, "Students Seek Out AIDS Advice" *New York Times* 25 Nov 1985: C12.
[48] Alexander, C12.
[49] John B. Thopmson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 244.

extended mediazations may, from one point of view, help domesticate the issue of HIV/AIDS, but from the perspective of the "cultural forum" model of popular culture, they clearly demonstrate how television can encourage dialogue, discussion, and debate no matter what kind of ideological frame the narrative imposes on the issue at hand.

Along with the valorization of the personal over the social in TV movies, Gitlin seems concerned about the audience's insistence on the "familiar," the "normal." I accept as a given that most television viewers expect a certain amount of familiarity in television generally and in TV movies specifically. This has less to do with TV producers and TV viewers sharing the same "cultural style," as Gitlin argues. Culture is hardly as homogeneous as this implies. Moreover, as Thompson has written, and as elaborations of Stuart Hall's influential "encoding/decoding model" of communication suggest, the different sets of rules for encoding and decoding media "messages," "need not coincide nor even co-exist."[50] Nonetheless, TV movies are a television genre. Genres are defined not only by the repetition of certain representational strategies but by their cultural function. According to Thomas Schatz, genres are a type of social ritual which transform "certain fundamental cultural contradictions and conflicts into a unique conceptual structure that is familiar and accessible to a mass audience."[51] Film genres, and, by analogy, TV movies, are a manifestation of the collective "desire to confront elemental conflicts inherent in modern culture while at the same time participating in the projection of an idealized collective self-image."[52] It is, in part, the irresolvability of those cultural

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[50] Thompson, 140.
[51] Thomas Schatz, "The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study," in *Film Genre Reader*, Barry Keith Grant, ed. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1986), 96.
[52] Schatz, 99.

contradictions and the unattainability of the idealized self-image that sustains a genre and drives its ritualized repetitions. More simply, as Ron Lapsley and Michael Westlake have succinctly noted, "people do not fantasize about what they have got."[53]

The desire for familiarity in TV has less to do with a "cultural style" and much more to do with deeply embedded social and subjective needs. Roger Silverstone draws on Anthony Giddens's structuration theory and the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott in order to suggest that at various times in one's life and to a greater or lesser degree, TV comes to occupy a "potential space" and functions as a "transitional object" for its viewers.[54] At the root of the argument lies the observation that subjects require a certain amount of "ontological security" in order to make their way through everyday life. Ontological security is a "sense of the reliability of persons and things" that results from the confidence developed regarding one's "self-identity and the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments."[55] Ontological security enables one's ability to confront and minimize various potential environmental threats and is sustained through the routinized activities of everyday life.[56] Winnicott's work, for Silverstone, underscores the psychodynamic conditions that enable this sense of security while also giving us a way to situate social subjects spatially. The emergence of the social subject involves the creation of a "potential space" in which the infant begins to test reality and to create. It is here that one's identity is shaped in relation to a "transitional object," what

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[53] Rob Lapsley and Michael Westlake, "From Casablanca To Pretty Woman: The Politics of Romance," in *Contemporary Film Theory*, Anthony Easthope, ed. (New York: Longman, 1993), 180.
[54] Silverstone, 13.
[55] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of* Modernity (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1990), 92. Qtd. in Silverstone, 5.
[56] Silverstone, 6.

Winnicott refers to as the infant's "first possession."[57] This transitional object, is chosen, primarily, because of it familiarity, endowed with much emotional significance, providing comfort, continuity, and a defense against anxiety.[58] Because the infant focuses a great deal of cognitive and emotional activity on its transitional object, it also becomes a marker of "the infant's emerging powers of creativity."[59] Silverstone explores how TV can become a transitional object for infants, but also suggests that it is not something that "we" outgrow. Rather, TV "can and does continue to occupy potential space throughout one's life."[60] TV lends itself to this kind of appropriation in later stages of life for, among other reasons, its constant, familiar flow through which we continue to test reality, renew our sense of ontological security, reform our identities, and participate in the creation of a shared social environment.

Gitlin suggests that made-for-television "no doubt make less of an impression on society than series, for they don't stay around long enough to inspire sustained identification," and he continues, they "come and go, leaving who knows what traces in the consciousness of our time."[61] Following this logic, theatrical feature films would have no lasting impact either as they, too, "come and go," yet we know this to be not true. TV movies may not enable sustained identification, but they do, nonetheless, make an impression on public consciousness. The television broadcasts of the most well known TV movies such as *Brian's Song*, *The Burning Bed* (NBC, 1984), *Roots* (ABC, 1976), and

[57] Silverstone, 9.
[58] Silverstone, 9.
[59] Silverstone, 9.
[60] Silverstone, 15.
[61] Gitlin, 157.

The Day After (ABC, 1983) were some of the most widely watched events in television history. *Brian's Song* was the first of the TV movie blockbusters earning a surprise 32.9 rating and a 48 audience share.[62] Seventy-five million viewers tuned in to watch *The Burning Bed*.[63] The final installment of the mini-series *Roots* was seen by 80 million viewers, out performing every Super Bowl and becoming one the most watched television broadcasts ever.[64]

As "media events," these TV movies saturate the public sphere and their images become fixtures of American popular culture not through sustained identification but because those viewers often sense that they are participating in something "special," that they are sharing an event of sociohistorical significance with others, and these media events often maintain their significance for a long time after the broadcast ends. In the case of docudramas, one common type of TV movie, the audience is, as Carveth points out, "presold."[65] In other words, the producers base their movies on controversial events that the media has covered in much detail and in which most viewers have already invested a great deal of interest precisely because of the sociocultural tensions and anxieties that they evoke. These often disturbing stories are "ripped from the headlines," and that is the major reason for their appeal. For these viewers, the TV movie presentation of the events may become a major future point of reference for the events being recounted, even as the headlines recede. Moreover, as Carveth again points out,

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[62] Gomery, 208.
[63] Rapping, 69.
[64] Leslie Fishbein, "*Roots*: Docudrama and the Interpretation of History," in *American History, American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, John O'Connor, ed. (New York: Ungar Press, 1983), 281.
[65] Carveth, 122.

those viewers who are least familiar with the event or issue often learn the most from TV movie representations of them.[66]

The point here is that TV movies do not require sustained identification to have an impact on their audiences. Historically, TV movies have been able to push the limits of the possibility for the representation of "controversial" subject matter on television without alienating a mass audience. In fact, this has become one of their major defining characteristics. TV movies are, in Schulze's words, a "privileged site for the negotiation of problematic social issues."[67] Rapping points to how TV movies have on rare occasions caused moments of norm-shattering, collective insight. For Rapping, "they often make a case for their 'messages' that is so moving it is hard to forget. Many have an intensity and a passion that makes their intervention into the public sphere potentially explosive."[68]

Another thing that Gitlin fails to recognize is the durability of the TV movie. He also did not anticipate the role that TV movies would serve for cable networks. Television technology exhibits what Thompson might call a high degree of "fixation," meaning that the TV technology and the practices of the television industry make possible the storage of symbolic forms for subsequent use.[69] In addition, while symbolic forms are easily stored, they are also readily reproduced. Given the recent proliferation of various "channels of selective diffusion" on television, and by that Thompson is referring to, among other things, the advent of cable and home video technologies, the availability of these easily

[66] Carveth, 126.
[67] Schulze, 166.
[68] Rapping, 43.
[69] Thompson, 165.

stored and reproduced symbolic forms is extended in both time and space.[70] TV movies made from earlier eras continue to circulate on cable TV on a wide range of channels including Lifetime, TV Land, Turner Classic Movies, and Logo, attesting to their on-going cultural significance and appeal and allowing for the possibility of multiple viewings in multiple contexts and framed in various and different ways.

In 1998 Lifetime launched the digital Lifetime Movie Network (LMN), which airs seasoned theatrical and TV movies, both Lifetime original off-network productions acquired primarily from ABC, 24 hours a day. Shortly thereafter it launched the companion website (www.lmn.com) where viewers could go to view the network schedule, take part in TV movie chat rooms, link to external advertiser websites, download video and still images, among other interactive offerings. The economic reason for rolling out the Lifetime Movie Network was the fact that these TV movies, even after multiple broadcasts, continued to attract a relatively large number of viewers. In early 2002, the Lifetime Movie Network was being delivered to 21 million households (up 172% over the prior year) and its prime time rating of .8 was up 60% from 2001.[71] By the end of 2002, the Lifetime Movie Network was available in 35.9 million homes.[72]

Moreover, TV movies that have for some time been available on VHS home video are becoming more readily available on DVD. In 2004, Lifetime, again, signed a deal with Warner Home Video to distribute its TV movies on DVD beginning with the title

[70] Thompson, 68.
[71] Jon Lafayette, "What Women Want," *Cable World* 4 Feb. 2002: 5.
[72] "Inside Media," *Mediaweek* 9 Dec. 2002. Online. LexisNexis® Academic. 15 June 2006.

Homeless in Harvard, which originally aired in 2003.[73] More recently, Lifetime began making a number of its original TV movie productions, such as *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Arajuo Story* (2006), about the personal struggles of a young male-to-female transsexual, available through the iTunes video downloading service where they can be watched on a personal computer or a portable video iPod.[74]

What we may need to attend to when it comes to TV movies, then, is not so much sustained identification as the multitude of ways in which TV movies now circulate, and, as I have already suggested, how viewers relate to TV movies and fit them back into their lives. For example, TV movies are often screened at fundraisers and other social and political gatherings. One Lifetime Online user discusses making a copy of the movie to screen for a group at his college. *The Truth About Jane* (Lifetime, 1999) was screened at a fundraiser for the organization, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). I attended a screening of *Doing Time on Maple Drive* at a gay and lesbian community center in Austin, TX in 1999. The Cornerstone Gay and Lesbian Center then sponsored what they called the "Our Community Film Series." The purpose behind the series is clear: "Through a series of films, 'our community' illustrates life through the eyes of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. Themes include coming out, AIDS, civil rights, relationships, and more. The goal of the program is to educate participants about issues pertinent to the community." Twice a month videos were shown and discussed in a group forum. *Doing Time on Maple Drive* was one of the videos screened. It is not

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[73] Jill Kipnis, "DVD Mines Made-For-TV," *Billboard* 3 July 2004. Online. LexisNexis® Academic. 15 June 2006.
[74] Umstead, R. Thomas. "Lifetime Offers $4 Movies on iTunes." *Multichannel News* 8 Jan. 2007: 14.

obviously a "gay movie" although, as discussed previously, the gay and lesbian press saw it as significant. The youngest son is no more or less a central character than his siblings, and his "coming out" is only one of several "traumas" the parents must face, though it is suggested to be the most devastating and the least reconcilable. Still, the television movie is identified as being "pertinent to the community." During the discussion that followed the screening one viewer told of the experience of seeing the movie as an adolescent at a time when he knew he has gay but before coming out to anyone. His decision not to come out was impacted by seeing the movie and witnessing the family's devastation. The point behind this brief example, again, is that viewers of TV movies impact viewers in spite of a lack of sustained identification and that a viewer's understanding of the movie is influenced by collective and collaborative viewing strategies that must be attended to.

Rapping repeatedly bemoans that TV movies and their producers are not more "radical," that they are, at best, wholly liberal. The author does not equivocate when it comes to the ideological effects of TV movies. She writes that "the role of TV movies—for economic and social reasons—is to domesticate social issues, to personalize them and to push a view of problem resolution that is profamily in the most reactionary" way.[75] She echoes Gitlin when she writes that TV movies can "rarely afford to give even a glimpse of public reality."[76] TV movies "trivialize issues of power and money," they "obliterate or mystify" social, political, and economic institutions, and they "simply do not

[75] Rapping, 66.
[76] Rapping, 35.

portray a political or economic world in any meaningful sense."[77] This is the constant refrain of her

book. It is repeated so often and with such force, that the more subtle point she is trying to make is almost lost. For all of their ideological failings, Rapping nonetheless concedes that TV movies' "power and importance comes from something else, from their ability to enter into the public sphere and arouse deep passion about political injustice."[78]

In spite of all of the potential harm she insists that they no doubt do in the service of a dominant ideology, Rapping still suggests, perhaps remarkably, that TV movies are the "most suitable form for dealing with . . . complex social issues."[79] Here she begins to bracket off the issue of ideology in order to focus on the affective dimensions of TV movies, how ideological arguments about TV movies fail to understand how a TV movie "'works' emotionally."[80] TV movies cannot be reduced to a single ideological effect because they are too resonant with "tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities" to allow for it. She suggests that any simple conclusions about the ideological effects of TV movies are complicated by, for example, "such aspects of dramatic narrative as plot, characterization, atmosphere, and a mass of tensions and conflicts among and between all of these."[81] Rapping's more subtle, and more interesting, argument about TV movies is that they matter most because they engage viewers emotionally and this type of affective arousal is precisely what elicits passion about issues of social importance and may then

[77] Rapping, 35, 41.
[78] Rapping, 45.
[79] Rapping, 19.
[80] Rapping, 19.
[81] Rapping, 19.

potentially stir people to take socially significant action. The power of TV movies comes from their ability to integrate "ideology and raw emotion."[82] If "emotional response is

[82] Rapping, 54.

what makes these movies matter," it is because "emotion is a crucial element in one's coming to understand, and certainly to be involved with, the problems of society."[83] TV movies seem to impact their audiences in spite of the lack of serial identification with characters, realism, and the domestication of social issues because one can be deeply moved by them in a way "that stays with one and colors the way one experiences and responds to certain events."[84]

It should come as no surprise, then, that accounts of watching TV movies typically involve the interplay, like TV movies themselves, of ideology and emotion. For example, these comments appeared on the editorial page of the *Ashville Citizen-Times* in October, 1997, after the reporter, also a gay man, had had read a previous article recounting why several local ministers were "upset" over a gay pride march. He writes, "The night after I read the hateful words of the preachers in my hometown newspapers, I sat watching the television movie *Any Mother's Son*, about the brutal death of US Navy sailor Allen Schindler. It was a shocking, riveting movie." He continues, "I could not hold back the tears as I sat there thinking about the continuing injustice of it all. I thought about the thousands of Schindlers who have been killed for no other reason than they were gay." He details his own struggles coming out as gay and concludes, "I always advise other homosexuals to go ahead and tell people—not for the cause but for yourself, your own mental health. You'll never know true peace until you do."[85]

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[83] Rapping 54, 68.
[84] Rapping, 130.
[85] Perry Young, "It's Better to Tell," editorial, *Ashville Citizen-Times* 10 Oct 1997: A8.

Audiences talk about TV movies and these discussions have social ramifications. This editorial, to me, is significant because it demonstrates clearly how TV movies can stir our passion about social injustice as Rapping describes, because it illustrates how TV movies and our experiences of them, through the processes of discursive elaboration and extended mediazation, are not easily contained, and because in spite of the ways in which TV movies attempt to personalize social issues, viewers find ways to make significant social connections between their own experiences, the events depicted on television, and the larger world around them. Rapping's argument that TV movies always attempt to resolve social issues in conservative, profamily ways, might lead us to the conclusion that the ideological message of *Any Mother's Son* has something to do with the importance of maternal care and unconditional love within the bonds of the family. Yet this viewer offers up his own political solution by suggesting that "coming out" is the only way to solve the social injustices inflicted on gays and lesbians.

Toward the end of her book, Rapping argues that in spite of the fact that the TV movie under discussion upholds the "status quo," discussing the movie in those terms seems to miss the point. What matters to her at this juncture are the "glimpses of utopian resolution" and the "intermittent moments of resistance" it offers.[86]

Of course, it hardly needs to be pointed out to the careful reader that Rapping has come a long way from the argument she presents in the introductory chapters of her book against critical theories of media audiences which, when taxed to discuss the political consequences of audience research, feebly posit that the "temporary or momentary

[86] Rapping, 139.

resistance" offered by the media are "politically meaningful."[87] Rapping writes that such work becomes so "stuck in moments of affective empowerment or temporary transformations, that it becomes a kind of apology for not expecting anything more."[88] I think Rapping would argue that what differentiates her stance from those of the writers she critiques is that she does not conceive of the viewer in isolation from other viewers or the wider public sphere. She is not interested in the idiosyncratic, private meanings that "atomized models of reception" tend to explore.[89] Of course, other scholars have urged a reexamination of media theories that rely on atomized modes of reception, noting how the television "text" is a collective construct as its meaning is formed in social groups of viewers. Thompson has argued that even the most seemingly privatized acts of media reception are not "non-social" as they typically involve elements of "quasi-mediated interaction," between producer and viewer, for example, and the "discursive elaboration" of media messages by the viewer.[90] However, what also seems to matter to Rapping is not that understanding is collective but that it operates to have material effects on the public and domestic spheres. It matters, for example, that enough people watched *The Burning Bed* and enough people had similar enough responses that the TV movie had a long-lasting social impact. *The Burning Bed*, as a public media event situated within a wider public sphere of multiple discourses, events, and forces, "led to actual structural changes in the way domestic violence is handled."[91]

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[87] Rapping, xxii.
[88] Rapping, xxiv.
[89] Rapping, xxvi.
[90] Thompson, 228, 243.
[91] Rapping, xxviii.

Rapping writes "the term public is, for my purposes more useful . . . than audience."[92] Television, then, is understood as a "public sphere," which "succeeds more than other forums in hailing us as citizens with interests in common and in embodying a version of public debate on matters of common concern."[93] Conceiving of the audience as a "public" is meant to counter the tendency that she sees in privileging individuated acts of reception over more collectively and publicly shaped viewing experiences. She states that the notion of a "public" is one way that she can actually link individual responses with collective and even activist ones.[94] However, her approach conceives of the "public" only as "mass audience" and the public sphere as singular and "holistic." Her ultimate concern, when it comes to TV movie audiences, is with what she refers to as "politically significant numbers" on the largest scale.[95] Again, this is strategic and meant to counter the tendency she sees in insisting that multiple "differences" make any notion of collectivity problematic. Therefore, she posits that there is a shared social, discursive, and cultural arena, and it is most adequately represented by the "kinds of television we all experience, especially those . . . that we tend to experience together."[96] Hence, the emphasis throughout her book is on the biggest TV movie blockbusters during the height of their popularity on network television. These are, however, only a small fraction of the TV movies that have been made. Most TV movies are not viewed by 80 million viewers simultaneously. Are smaller audiences somehow less politically significant? For

[92] Rapping, xxxi.
[93] Rapping, xxxi.
[94] Rapping, xliii.
[95] Rapping, xxvii.
[96] Rapping, xxxiv.

Rapping, the answer would likely be yes, because TV movies are most significant when they engage the viewing audience as a nation in major public events.

This is problematic for several reasons. First, TV movies are no longer as central to broadcast network TV and do not currently draw such a large, nationwide audience as they once did. Are these TV movies somehow less socially significant than their predecessors from the point of view of the loyal audiences who still watch and engage with them? I would argue that they are not. Second, "public" in the broad sense loses its explanatory value: "anyone who watches TV movies, for whatever reason and in whatever critical frame of mind."[97] No approach to TV movies that is interested in the public can account for all viewers at all times. We can, however, still focus on the audience as public but examine specific instances where it is made manifest. The scale is certainly smaller, but I would argue, these moments are not socially insignificant.

Rapping only conceives of a public in the most abstract, universalizing way because she problematically argues that TV movies cross social, cultural, and economic boundaries to "address us as equals," "members of a common group" who "share a common project."[98] Rapping seems to share assumptions with those theorists who, following the lead of Jürgen Habermas, argue that differences in the public sphere are somehow bracketed off in a way that allows for the open and equal participation of all in critical discussions of political and social significance. We know in principle that the bourgeois public sphere discussed by Habermas may have been open but in practice

[97] Rapping, xiii.
[98] Rapping, xxxiii-xxxiv.

numerous restrictions were imposed on it participants.[99] The same holds true now, in the era of the mediated public sphere. This kind of setting aside of differences does not help us explain how actual viewers engage with TV movies. Watching TV movies, debating social issues, and participating in the wider public all proceed from viewers located in particular social positions, and the stakes one has in various representations and cultural debates vary based on those positions. Moreover, most television, even—and perhaps especially—those programs that draw the largest possible audience are experienced and elaborated within smaller groups, "idiocultures," or networks of interaction, comprised of families, friends, co-workers, fellow fans, television blog readers, and so on who engage in the construction of a social reality around media texts.[100] While we may be conscious that the "whole world is watching" and feel as though we are participating in a mass event, we incorporate these texts back into our lives within the context of the idiocultures within which we interact.

CABLE TV, NEW MEDIA, AND PUBLIC SPACE

Rapping's text is incredibly useful in drawing our attention to TV movies as complex media texts which function in various registers as "emotional drama, ideological discourse, and social event."[101] She, admittedly, however, has little to say about viewer responses or TV movies in the cable era. Her concern is with the mass public, and TV, in many ways, encourages us to situate ourselves within the type of public sphere posited by

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[99] Thompson, 112.
[100] Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington, "Reach Out and Touch Someone: Viewers Agency, and Audiences in the Televisual Experience," in *Viewing Reading. Listening: Audiences and Cultural Reception*, Jon Cruz and Justin Lewis, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 83.
[101] Rapping, 56.

Rapping. This was perhaps especially true in the age of broadcast television when only the three major networks were available. Megan Mullen has noted that this scenario of network dominance "is of course conducive to the formation of a common cultural agenda."[102] This is echoed by Thompson when he writes of the "millions of individuals who may never interact with one another, but who share, by virtue of their participation in a mediated culture, a common experience and a collective memory."[103] Fred MacDonald traces the development of network television focusing on the ways in which the industry consistently tapped into and shaped mass, mainstream interests and tastes to the detriment of audiences whose interests and tastes were different or narrower. The idea of "one nation under television," for MacDonald, had a stultifying effect. Television under the American model emerged as an "efficient, streamlined reality that existed to please the majority."[104]

Given this, for MacDonald, the rise of cable television in the 1980s, the proliferation of TV channels, and the programming options cable opened had a "liberating" effect on viewers. "As new technologies made possible a multiplicity of channels and TV usages, the long-suppressed pluralism in popular tastes was manifest in the diffusion of the broadcast audience."[105] Cable television enabled "narrowcasting," television programming aimed at smaller audiences, more narrowly defined, but from the point of view of the network and its advertisers, potentially economically lucrative

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[102] Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States: Revolution or Evolution?* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2003), 131.
[103] Thompson, 163.
[104] Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 122.
[105] MacDonald, 254.

demographics. Cable, according to MacDonald, could—indeed to survive, must—offer what he terms, "less popular culture," television programming targeting audiences typically under-served by the broadcast networks.[106] The primary challenge facing the cable industry in the 1990s for MacDonald was developing original programming to supplement the movies and off-network reruns of network television programs as "program diversity" was the *raison d'être* of cable.[107]

As Mullen discusses at length, early in their development, cable television networks relied so heavily on broadcast network programming genres and even network programs that their "overarching characteristic" was their "resemblance to and dependence on broadcast television."[108] While this is hardly the kind of "liberation" discussed by MacDonald, successful cable networks found ways to recontextualize recycled network television genres and programs so that they distinguished their network from both broadcast television and other cable networks and allowed them to develop a "brand" while at the same time, addressing their audiences in meaningful ways. Cable television programming and promotional strategies "retrofit" network genres and programs as entertainment or information specific to their audience niche.[109] Original programming combined with recycled and reworked network fare has been the primary strategy by which cable networks have developed their brand.

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[106] MacDonald, 258.
[107] MacDonald, 256.
[108] Mullen, 134.
[109] Jonathan David Tankel and Jane Banks, "Lifetime Television and Women: Narrowcasting as Electronic Space," in *Voices in the Street: Explorations in Gender, Media, and Public Space*, Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert, eds. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1997), 264.

As cable networks, such as Lifetime, became financially successful, many did begin to invest in original programming. Movies, both acquired theatrical and TV movies and original TV movies, have been central to the development of the Lifetime brand, which is, as most cable viewers would know, "Television for Women." In 1989, for example, Lifetime acquired 23 films from Orion pictures for an estimated $40-50 million.[110] As late as 2004, Lifetime continued to acquire theatrical films such as the Oscar winning *The Hours* and the Jennifer Anniston and Jake Gyllenhal vehicle *The Good Girl* that would appeal to its target audience.[111] While, Lifetime recycled feature films of interest to its female audience as part of its narrowcasting strategy, Heather Hundley describes at some length the importance of original TV movies to the network's development. In 1990, for example, Lifetime announced it would produce fifteen original TV movies under the banner "Original Lifetime World Premiere Movies" to be shown over the next three years. These original productions were so successful that their ratings were typically three times higher than the ratings for acquired movies the network also aired. In an interesting twist on the tendency of cable networks to recycle network programs, in 1991, Lifetime's TV movies were popular and successful enough that ABC bought the rights to Lifetime's TV movie, *Stop at Nothing*, which was broadcast on ABC months *after* it premiered on Lifetime. By 1994, Lifetime was spending $50-60 million annually on its original TV movie productions because they continued to drive up the network's ratings and earn it critical recognition and praise.[112] In 1995, Lifetime began

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[110] Mullen, 144.
[111] "Lifetime Makeover: Movies on Mondays," *Business and Industry* 20 Sept. 2004: 5.
[112] Heather Hundley, "The Evolution of Gendercasting: The Lifetime Television Network—'Television for Women,'" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29.4 (Winter 2002): 176-179.

airing one original TV movie each month under the banner "Original Films" which Lifetime considered to be "the most explicit expression of the niche for which they programmed and sold to advertisers."[113] Significantly, as Lifetime's commitment to TV movies increased, so did its ratings, and so did its ability to capture the highly coveted 18-34 year-old female demographic.

Lifetime's commitment to TV movies has not abated. It slated twelve original TV movies for 2004 and nineteen original TV movies for 2005.[114] In 2004, Lifetime also rolled out its "New Movie Monday," during which, over the course of 52 weeks, the network aired an original TV movie every Monday night. Rick Haskins, Executive Vice President of Lifetime, remarked during the announcement, "Movies have helped to build the Lifetime brand" and "our viewers are telling us loud and clear: We want more movies."[115] Significantly, "New Movie Monday" was a deliberate attempt to boost sluggish ratings. While theatrical films are still also aired on Lifetime, there is no similar weekly time-slot strategy on the network for them.

Rapping's work on TV movies focuses exclusively on those made in the broadcast network era for broadcast television networks. The place of TV movies on television has changed dramatically since that time. In the conclusion to her book, she makes a number of brief, productive remarks pointing in this direction. She notes that basic and premium cable channels have moved into the TV movie market. "While these movies may

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[113] Eileen R. Meehan and Jackie Byars, "Telefeminism: How Lifetime Got Its Groove, 1984-1997," *Television & New Media* 1.1 (2000), 44.
[114] Allison Romano, "Movie Madness; Cable Turns to TV Films to Boost Ratings and Revenue," *Broadcasting and Cable* 9 Aug. 2004: 6.
[115] "Lifetime Makeover," 5.

sometimes have social agendas, they are not publicized in the way network 'specials' are, and they are not received in the same way."[116] The so-called "social agendas" of cable TV movies are often more readily apparent than those of the network TV movies of the 1970s and beyond.

For example, NBC's *The Matthew Shepard Story* is not that different than other TV movies that follow the conventions of the domestic melodrama. A young gay man is murdered during a brutal homophobic hate crime and a family is left to pick up the pieces and keep itself together. HBO's *The Laramie Project* (2002), however, diverges quite significantly from the conventions of the genre by telling the story from the point of view of a group of activist video artists, some gay or lesbian and some straight, who travel to the town of Laramie, Wyoming, where the murder took place, and engage the community in an attempt to uncover the social roots of homophobic hatred and violence while documenting the social turmoil the murder caused the small town. What Rapping seems to suggest here is that a change has occurred in the content, form, and promotion of TV movies and in the way they are consumed. Indeed, she writes of a significant change in the "media world," marked by a "proliferation of cultural products produced for and consumed by people in more and more varied ways. In a postmodern age, the differentiation of audiences and modes of reception is inevitable."[117] Gomery had already pointed to the early importance of TV movies to cable TV in the early 1980s.[118] As TV

[116] Rapping, 148.
[117] Rapping, 148.
[118] Gomery, 217.

movies have increased in number and prestige on cable networks, their centrality to the broadcast networks has diminished.

2003 was a significant year for TV movies in this respect. *Angels in America* became the most highly-regarded and rewarded TV miniseries since *Roots*, earning 21 Emmy nominations and solidifying HBO's status as top producer of quality TV movies. It clearly was a highly promoted media event. That same year, CBS pulled *The Reagans* from its scheduled broadcast time in November "sweeps week," and then sold it to Showtime, also owned by Viacom, for $3 million less than what it paid for it. This was done in order to squelch the controversy that erupted after a number of conservative Republican organizations read and objected to the script which CBS had deliberately leaked to *The New York Times* in order to stir up buzz about the movie and increase ratings.[119] Ironically, *The Reagans* earned *Showtime* seven Emmy nominations. By this time, only CBS continued to regularly broadcast TV movies on Sunday nights, a practice that all three networks had followed for a number of years. In the fall of 2006, however, CBS followed the of way NBC and ABC and announced that Sunday night would be dedicated to series programming.[120] Soon after, industry commentators began asking, "Who killed the TV movie?"[121] Of course, the genre did not truly expire; it simply migrated to cable TV, and it was successfully enabling cable networks to effectively differentiate themselves and compete with the major broadcast

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[119] Bill McConnell, "CBS Slammed for Prez Veto; No Good Comes from Canceling *The Reagans*," *Broadcasting and Cable* 10 Nov. 2003: 1.
[120] Alex Strachan, "CBS Scuttles weekly TV Movie," *Windsor Star* 19 May 2006: C4. Online. LexisNexis® Academic. 15 June 2006.
[121] Brian Lowry, "Rounding Up Suspects in Demise of Telepix," *Variety* 26 June 2006: 16.

networks. In June 2006, for example, two cable TV movies, Lifetime's *A Girl Like Me* and Disney's *Wendy Wu: Homecoming Warrior*, both earned higher ratings than NBC's broadcast of the Stanley Cup final against which they had been counterprogrammed.[122] The few recent network TV movies that we have seen, such as ABC's *Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America* (2006), in many ways a quite conventional TV movie that recalled the disaster TV movies of the 1980s, have failed to find audiences. Increasingly, the broadcast networks have, for now, abandoned TV movies in favor of dramatic and reality series programming. TV movies are now, almost exclusively, a cable television practice, and as such, the audience must be understood within the context of narrowcasting rather than broadcasting. As much as the existence of idiocultures and their centrality to understanding television and TV movies specifically, the ways in which narrowcasting practices shape audiences are important in understanding how viewers fit TV movies back into their lives.

Joseph Turow has argued that "primary media communities" formed when media users come to believe that a particular magazine or television channel, for example, "reaches people like them, resonates with their personal beliefs, and helps them chart their position in the larger world."[123] Mullen takes this notion one step further by arguing that the media creates "these sorts of media communities where they had not existed previously" by redirecting particular cultural practices in some instances and creating "entirely new fads" in others.[124] Of course, TV shapes identities and its influence is both

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[122] Lowry, 6.
[123] Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 4. Qtd. in Mullen, 194.
[124] Mullen, 194.

enabling and constraining. For me, the role TV plays in the shaping of identity has less to do with how it is able to impose certain social values or commercial interests on viewers who acquiesce because television offers them something desirable in exchange for whatever they are asked to give up (power, authenticity, legitimacy, etc.), perhaps unbeknownst to themselves. It is not, at least in any simple way, merely a matter of commodifying certain pre-formed identities. Rather, TV—and the Internet—provides an electronic context within which groups of viewers can engage in a process of discursive self-formation. To recall the earlier discussion of TV in the work of Silverstone, it is a "transitional object" whose familiar flow we rely on in order to continually test reality, reshape our identities, and participate in the collective creation of a shared social environment, a "potential space." All television viewing for Thompson is "appropriation" because viewers are always engaged in the process of making television "one's own" in a social context. Making a point similar to Lembo's discussed at the outset of this chapter, viewers in Thompson's analysis "receive mediated messages, talk about them with others . . . and integrate them into their lives" while gaining a "self-understanding" and participating in a "self-formation."[125]

Jonathan David Tankel and Jane Banks discuss narrowcasting as an "electronic space" in which viewers are invited to assemble and participate.[126] Others, perhaps most notably, Joshua Meyrowitz, have discussed television in terms of social space. His argument is that electronic media have severed the notion of social space from physical location. By bringing together previously widely dispersed populations in a new

[125] Thompson, 319.
[126] Tankel and Banks, 256.

electronic arena and fundamentally altering our "sense of place," television has created new social environments. For Meyrowitz, television has the ability to give viewers a sense of connection with the social world and with other viewers. "Through television, Americans may gain a strange sort of communion with each other."[127] A certain "placelessness" results from television's ability to confuse traditional distinctions between, for example, "here and there, live and mediated, and personal and public."[128] The public sphere has widened for Meyrowitz, giving everyone a "new (and relatively shared) perspective from which to view others and gain a reflected sense of self."[129] Similarly, Thompson writes that "any individual situated in the private domestic setting equipped with a TV set has potential access to the sphere of publicness created and mediated by television."[130] He also discusses what he calls the "interactional impact" of electronic media, by which he means the ways in which electronic media, and primarily television, have created new ways of acting and interacting that are not dependent upon the co-presence of the participants.[131] The everyday acts of viewers appropriating television programming establishes a "*virtual community of recipients* who may or may not interact with one another" but who nonetheless "comprise a collectivity that may be extended across time and space."[132]

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[127] Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 89-90.
[128] Meyrowitz, 308.
[129] Meyrowitz, 309.
[130] Thompson, 244.
[131] Thompson, 16.
[132] Thompson, 318; emphasis in original.

Tankel and Banks are drawing specifically on Gumpert's concept of "electronic space," the "associational construct without place between two or more persons."[133] The authors proceed to outline how television can fabricate a "web of social connectivity," encourage "social interaction," and create an "expectation of companionship" for its viewers in a way that makes it this type of electronic space.[134] In the case of Lifetime specifically, with its sophisticated narrowcasting strategies, viewers "are asked to identify with each other as well as to attend to the program offerings" so that they may "derive social pleasures more complex than those provided by purely 'one-way' mass media."[135] The authors argue the network serves "both commercial and social forces simultaneously."[136] Of course, the authors discuss throughout their article the importance of TV movies to Lifetime's brand and audience as a type of programming that continues to put women's issues in the fore.

Two key components of Lifetime's programming strategies which the authors argue make it most successful in creating an "electronic space" for its viewers are its participation is social issues through its programs and promotions as well as its role as "social agency" and the ways in which it encourages "various oppositional readings of media programming."[137] If the Lifetime television network promised its viewers in 1984-5 a more interactive televisual experience through its early all-talk, viewer call-in show format, which included the very popular "Good Sex with Dr. Ruth," the launch of

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[133] Gary Gumpert, "Public Space and Electronic Space—Two Worlds That Interact," *Media Development* 37.3 (1990), 4. Qtd. in Tankel and Banks, 258.
[134] Tankel and Banks, 259.
[135] Tankel and Banks, 259.
[136] Tankel and Banks, 267.
[137] Tankel and Banks, 267.

its online services in the early 1990s came through on that promise in a way that the television programs could not. Lifetime Online was initially made available to America Online subscribers before the debut of its own independently operated website (www.lifetimetv.com) made Lifetime Online available to potentially all Internet users. If "electronic space" is a potent metaphor for the types of social engagement and viewer interactivity encouraged by Lifetime Television, it is perhaps an even more apt description for what the Lifetime Online website offers users.

A basic assumption here is that online activity is a form of fundamentally social action that transcends physical locale. As Linda Harasim has suggested, computer networks are not simply "tools whereby we network: they have come to be experienced as *places* where we network."[138] If you were to walk in any coffee shop in most urban areas you would likely see as many people sitting alone with a laptop as you would sitting in groups talking face-to-face. To say that these people are somehow withdrawn, not engaged in social activity, is to fail to recognize the ways in which electronic media have altered our social environment. It only makes sense that computer users would want to take their laptops to places we typically associate with sociality as various kinds of computer usage—email, instant messaging, online chatting, blogging, and video sharing, for example—themselves are kinds of social activity. The example here of a coffee shop is deliberate and it brings me to the work of Ray Oldenburg who has attempted to counter

[138] Linda M. Harasim, "Networlds: Networks as Social Space," in *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication*, Linda M. Harasim, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 15; emphasis in original.

the tendency to view contemporary culture in terms of the placelessness brought about by electronic media in his book on the "third place."

According to Oldenburg, place in contemporary American culture is lacking and therefore place is a problematic notion. "People live in their respective neighborhoods for years. . .and those areas are rarely, if ever, mentioned on television. It is as if we don't live anywhere, or at least anywhere that matters."[139] He wants to counter this sense of placelessness by reasserting the importance of locality, represented by neighborhood shops, cafes, bars, and other "hangouts." For Oldenburg, these "third places" are the vital centers of social life. By "third places" Oldenburg is suggesting they exist outside of the home and workplace and in many ways offer a relief from the tensions we experience in our domestic and professional lives. Third places offer a sense of belonging. They strengthen social ties through social interaction. They cultivate an interest in social and political matters by encouraging the informed public discussion of issues of importance to those who frequent them. They provide an emotional outlet as well, a remedy to loneliness, boredom, pressure, and frustration.

Early commentators on the Internet and online activity seemed drawn to Oldenburg's notion of the third place. Howard Rheingold, for example, enthusiastically if unsystematically applies it in discussing the social significance of The WELL, an early computer conferencing system constructed by Internet users. "Perhaps," he writes, "cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of

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[139] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and the Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999), 70-71.

community that were lost when the malt shop became the mall."[140] Of course, the irony here is that technology and media, as much as the suburb and the shopping mall, are to blame for the "loss of community" and the impoverishment of public life from Oldenburg's perspective. "The home entertainment industry thrives on the dearth of the informal public life among the American middle class. Demand for all manner of electronic gadgetry to substitute vicarious watching and listening to for more direct forms of involvement is high."[141] He laments the fact that most children spend more time watching television, listening to the stereo, or talking on the phone than they do interacting with "real people."[142] He argues that third places are most likely to spring up where inhabitants have not been transformed into "shut-ins" due to their over-reliance on television.[143] He offers "face-to-face groups in which people participate in discussions of what is important to them and how to preserve it" as a remedy to the "harmful and alien influence that the media . . . represent."[144] At another point he argues that a "roomful of individuals intent upon video games is not a third place."[145] Anything—like loud music, television, or video games—that interrupts face-to-face communication undermines the viability of the third place. Oldenburg makes it quite clear that third places exist in spite of, not because of, electronic media. I would agree with Charles Soukup's assessment

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[140] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1993), 26.
[141] Oldenburg, 12.
[142] Oldenburg, 264.
[143] Oldenburg, 210-211.
[144] Oldenburg, 77.
[145] Oldenburg, 31.

that it seems likely that Oldenburg "does *not* believe that communication technologies can foster authentic or legitimate third places."[146]

While it is certainly true that the tavern has long been a source of news and information as well as a forum in which to "question, protest, sound out, supplement, and form opinion" as Oldenburg argues, it is not so clear that mass media simply "make shut-ins of otherwise healthy individuals" who become susceptible to media "manipulation." In fact, television has long been a central component of neighborhood tavern culture, though its introduction into the tavern was not an uncontested or simple matter. Observers in the 1940s often believed TV to be, much like Oldenburg does today, "an intruder in the environment it inhabits and, moreover, one that might bring other intruders [children and women] in its wake."[147] Nonetheless, TV was and remains a common component of neighborhood tavern experience. The emergence of TV and its incorporation into the neighborhood tavern in the late 1940s even altered the physical arrangement of tavern space.[148]

As Reuben Buford May argues, neighborhood tavern patrons in the 1990s use television to "facilitate social interaction."[149] Television, in fact, enables patrons to form and maintain tavern identities and relationships.[150] Tavern viewers "personalize" TV content within the context of tavern social life in a way that makes it relevant to the

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[146] Charles Soukup, "Computer-Mediated Communication as a Virtual Third Place: Building Oldenburg's Great Good Places on the World Wide Web," *New Media & Society* 8.3 (2006): 426.
[147] Oldenburg, 71.
[148] Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), 38-49.
[149] Reuben Buford May, "Tavern Culture and Television Viewing: The Influence of Local Viewing Culture on Patrons' Reception of Television Programs," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28.1 (Feb. 1999), 72.
[150] May, 70.

group.[151] The "parasocial relationships" that tavern patrons develop with TV personalities actually facilitates "shared group interaction" as these relationships provide a "social link" between patrons who share the requisite knowledge of a particular TV personality.[152] Tavern patrons also often "challenge and evaluate" television programs in a way that helps create a sense of group identity.[153] Within the context of the neighborhood tavern, Buford demonstrates that television provides a "battery of themes from which patrons could select and elaborate on in their discussions."[154] What Buford illustrates quite clearly is that third places and television are not necessarily as antagonistic as Oldenburg has argued that they are.

Sherry Turkle is another early commentator on the Internet who contemplates Oldenburg's concept of the third place as a metaphor for "cyberspace." Turkle seems less convinced of both the existence and even the possibility of the third place in a "culture of simulation" such as ours.[155] She suggests that the renewed interest in coffee shops and local bars is a "merely nostalgic" attempt to create neighborhoods where they did not previously exist.[156] She also suggests that only "technological optimists" would posit that "the way to revitalize community is to sit alone, in our rooms, at our networked computers and filling our lives with virtual friends."[157] From this perspective, "virtual community" may simply be another nostalgic simulation of actual community. "Let's

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[151] May, 79.
[152] May, 85-86.
[153] May, 90.
[154] May, 78.
[155] Sherry Turkle, *Life On the Screen: Identity in the age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 235.
[156] Turkle, 233.
[157] Turkle, 235.

call it the Disneyland effect," she writes.[158] I would want to argue that the Internet, like television before it, does not so much attempt to recall or reinscribe old forms of sociality and experience within a new electronic context as it enables altogether new electronic forms of sociality and experience.

While Turkle seems dismissive of both third places and the possibility of meaningful computer-mediated social interaction, others still have continued to express an interest in the possible applicability of the third place metaphor for understanding computer-mediated sociality. A number of these authors are discussed by Soukup and all seem to look to answer the question of whether or not new electronic media can help solve the "problem of place."[159] Lori Kendall's ethnographic study of the BlueSky MUD, or Multi-User Domain, a type of user created virtual reality, attempts to demonstrate how computer-mediated environments, much like third places, provide the context for meaningful social interaction outside of work and home.[160] Douglas Schuler has traced the similarities between third places and computer-mediated social environments in terms of, among other things, how each enables conversation, encourages humor and play, offers participants a sense of "home away from home," and encourage repeat visits in a way that makes participants "regulars."[161]

Soukup's is the most recent and most extensive attempt to relate the notion of the third place to computer-mediated social environments. To emphasize the difference between his own and more traditional configurations of third places, he suggests "virtual

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158 Turkle, 236.
159 Soukup, 424.
160 Laurie Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2002).
161 Douglas Schuler, *New Community Networks* (New York: ACM Press, 1996).

third place" as an appropriate term. While drawing attention to the digital nature of the environments it describes and suggesting its detachment from physical places, it nonetheless draws attention to computer-mediated social environments as valuable social resources for computer users who confront the "problem of place." They, too, provide a "context for sociability, spontaneity, community building and emotional expressiveness."[162] While he traces out the similarities between third places and virtual third places, he is also attuned to their differences. Third places emphasize localized communities while virtual third places enable "delocalized" modes of social interaction.[163] While users in a virtual third place do not share a common locality, they do share a common "symbolic space."[164] While third places are, in principle, open and inclusive—though Soukup rightly points out that Oldenburg overemphasizes the inclusivity of traditional third places— "countless barriers" stand in the way of people being able to access virtual third places.[165] While traditional third places are social levelers—again Soukup takes Oldenburg to task for overstating the capacity for third places to eradicate social and cultural differences and hierarchies—virtual third places demonstrate how while "social capital" fosters social connectedness, it is not always distributed evenly or fairly.[166]

Finally, Soukup suggests how virtual third places should appear and function, if they are to offer a viable solution to the problem of place. He begins by suggesting that

[162] Soukup, 423.
[163] Soukup, 427.
[164] Soukup, 434.
[165] Soukup, 438.
[166] Soukup, 430.

they should reassert the local as the primary social reference for users, or they should explicitly situate the "interaction within an existing geographical community."[167] Here again, however, we introduce the Disneyland effect that Turkle speaks of, the nostalgic, electronic simulation of an impossible "real."

I would argue to the contrary that what makes virtual third places an exciting possible solution to the problem of place is the very fact that they enable sociality in the absence of any shared physical locale. Even Soukup concedes that it is important to "move beyond" notions of place that are tied to physical geography and suggests that place online should be understood as "self-selected and mutually constructed" definitions of the cultural context in which social interaction occurs.[168] Next he suggests that virtual third places should encourage the active participation of a diverse group of users who share similar interests and concerns. He argues that virtual third places should be "co-constructed by the participating members."[169] Users should be able to alter the components of the virtual third place and alter its shape and content in a way that resonates with its "defined locale."[170] Finally, he posits that virtual third places should not strive to be extravagant multimedia experiences, but they should, nonetheless, foster the "illusion of non-mediation via immersion."[171] Users should forget that they are taking part in a virtual social network. I would argue that this is impossible and not necessarily desirable. Again, electronic media offer new forms of social action and

[167] Soukup, 432.
[168] Soukup, 433.
[169] Soukup, 434.
[170] Soukup, 435.
[171] Soukup, 435.

interaction and new modes for the presentation of self. Part of the appeal of virtual third places is that they are mediated environments in which users can experiment with these various forms and modes.

Some of my own reservations about Oldenburg's formulation of the third place are related to how the author discusses gender and sexuality that have not, as far as I am aware of, ever been interrogated. The "joys" of third places are, for Oldenburg, "largely those of same-sex association."[172] Third places may encourage same-sex association but "eroticism," however, is "almost always absent in all-male groups" because sexual desire requires tension in order to imbue a relationship with erotic interest, and men, in an all-male bonding situation, are "too much at ease and in tune with one another" to engender sexual desire between them.[173] It is absurd to suggest that eroticism does not exist amongst all-male groups unless one's conceptualization of masculinity somehow excludes both same-sex desire and gay men from the start. Moreover, all-male spaces such as gay bath houses and gay bars would not seem to be somehow disqualified as third places simply because they allow for the articulation, expression, and circulation of male-male sexual desire. These places may, too, offer a refuge from home life and work, encourage conversation, foster a sense of belonging, and enable social interaction in addition to providing possible sexual access to other men. Clearly, Oldenburg's conceptualization of masculinity does exclude same-sex desire and gay men, yet somehow we are still to accept that his concept of the third place is inclusive, accessible to the general public, without formal criteria for participation, and able to expand

[172] Oldenburg, 230.
[173] Oldenburg, 250.

possibilities for association. Given that gays, not to mention lesbians, are implicitly excluded from Oldenburg's third places, it hardly seems true, then, that third places as Oldenburg describes them "counter the tendency to be restrictive in the enjoyment of others by being open to all and by laying emphasis on qualities not confined to status distinctions."[174]

Oldenburg also enlists the third place in his attempt to reassert male dominance in a society in which he sees the simultaneous erasure of third places and male bonding as lamentable.[175] With the disappearance of male-dominated third places, the traditional "male style" which has been critical to the "survival of society" has yielded to a certain "delicacy" which he suggests may spell the ruin of civilization.[176] As if the survival of Western civilization were not enough to justify the exclusionary dynamic of third places, Oldenburg posits that "sexually segregated third places support the heterosexual relationships in several important ways," by, for example, encouraging men to see women as sex objects.[177] He writes that "women are sex objects for most men and it is important that they remain that," and it is same-sex association that enables erotic interest in the opposite sex.[178] In the end, third places simply cannot handle the integration of men and women: "The admittance of women seems to spell 'The End' in those invaded retreats once exclusively male."[179]

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[174] Oldenburg, 24.
[175] Oldenburg, 261.
[176] Oldenburg, 243-244.
[177] Oldenburg, 248-249.
[178] Oldenburg, 248.
[179] Oldenburg, 253.

While he seems to suggest that men and women both have separate third spaces which they share with members of the same gender, he nonetheless admits female third places have not been clearly evident in American culture. The obvious underlying message is that public life is the domain of men exclusively while women belong in the domestic sphere, a position that feminists have thoroughly and effectively undone. Oldenburg's discussion of gender and sexuality is clearly reactionary, and, I would argue, is itself a symptom of the problem of place initiated by the emergence of electronic media and the concomitant confusion of traditional social arrangements discussed by Meyrowitz: public and private, live and mediated, here and there. Simply because Oldenburg tethers third places to oppressive, sexist, and heterosexist aims, however, in an attempt to reassert traditional heterosexual, male dominance does not mean that we have to follow suit when thinking about virtual third places.

ONLINE PUBLICS AND THE TV MOVIE

Lifetime Online operates as a virtual third place where users go for relief from the tensions experienced in their domestic lives to enjoy a sense of belonging through social interaction. As a virtual third place, Lifetime Online encourages an interest in social and political matters by enabling the public discussion of issues of importance to its users. It provides an emotional outlet as well, a way for viewers to escape from loneliness, boredom, pressure, and frustration. Perhaps even more so than the network "itself," Lifetime Online, demonstrates how narrowcasting strategies can create a web of social connectivity, encourage social interaction, and create an expectation of companionship through viewer interactivity. Lifetime Online is not the small, grassroots Internet site that

some may associate with a virtual third place. Indeed, a large, multi-national media conglomerate created and operates it and it exists primarily to serve economic interests. However, as Tankel and Banks point out, the mass media must fulfill economic and social aims simultaneously; they are not mutually exclusive. Still, it is important to address that Lifetime Online operates to capture viewers' interest in Lifetime Television, secure viewer loyalty, and further the Lifetime brand.

The Internet, specifically the World Wide Web, is a mass medium although it can easily be mistaken for a "demassified" one.[180] By 2002, Internet access had penetrated over 60 million households in the United States.[181] Moreover, sites created and operated by multi-media national conglomerates dominate the Internet. Advertising-supported cable television websites, such as Lifetime Online, which make up over half of the entertainment websites frequented by American users, had 44 million visitors in July 2001 and the major broadcast network websites had an additional 11.3 million. Sites such as these attract 72% of all Internet users in the United States.[182] Most Internet traffic is concentrated in a small number of sites. According to Nielsen's NetRatings, the most popular sites, such as Yahoo, can attract 20 million visitors a month while the top 20% of the most frequented webstites account for 61% of all Internet traffic.[183] Nonetheless, the Internet enables a wide range of communicative forms, "from the most private exchanges to the most public announcements."[184] The Internet encourages a kind

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[180] James G. Webster and Shu-Fang Lin, "The Internet Audience: Web Use as Mass Behavior," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 46.1 (Mar. 2002): 9.
[181] Ha, 225.
[182] Ha, 235.
[183] Webster and Lin, 6.
[184] Webster and Lin, 8.

of virtual, social interactivity that is not traditional.[185] The Internet is, like television, a social technology that enables social interaction both within the home certainly, but, primarily, beyond the immediate domestic context in a way that confounds traditional distinctions between public and private.[186]

In a study on cross-media usage and the ability of cable television websites to enhance a network's brand and establish viewer loyalty, Ha and co-author Sylvia Chan-Olmstead draw a number of conclusions about TV viewers/Internet users that will have an impact on my discussion of online users' discussions of TV movies on Lifetime Online. While underutilized and not always cost-effective, they suggest that the positive benefits of cable network television websites are numerous: the networks broaden their reach beyond actual subscribers; the use of enhanced viewing features impacts a user's demand for broadband cable services; because users do not perceive online content to be a substitute for television programming, websites will not "cannibalize" viewers; and finally, websites promise additional revenue for the networks because the more users utilize the enhanced viewing features, "the more they feel the urge to buy something on the site."[187] The major benefit of such websites is the "pull and push strategy" they offer the networks in an effort to secure viewership: networks can use the enhanced viewing features unavailable through TV to pull viewers to their website in order to profit from the commercial possibilities online users offer where they can then push them back to TV

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[185] Margaret Morrison and Dean M. Krugman, "A Look At Mass and Computer Mediated Technologies: Understanding the Roles of Television and Computers in the Home," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45.1 (Winter 2001): 155.
[186] Morrison and Krugman, 137.
[187] Louisa Ha and Sylvia Chan-Olmstead. "Cross-Media Use in Electronic Media: The Role of Cable Television Web Sites in Cable Television Network Branding and Viewership," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48.4 (Dec. 2004): 640-641.

in order to secure viewer loyalty and advertising dollars.[188] Seen from the perspective of researchers concerned only with the commercial benefits of enhanced online viewing features, all of this raises concerns again about the power of mass media to shape the identities and experiences of viewers. Still, it is important to remember that viewers are not passive victims of the media industries and "audience appropriation of TV texts must be cultivated even while being channeled back into viewing patterns that support the medium's commercial structure."[189] The authors' research clearly proceeds with little or no concern for the social benefits afforded viewers/users by cable network television websites, simply from the interest in maximizing network profits. Again, however, the commercial and social roles of the TV and the Internet are not mutually exclusive.

Several of Ha and Chan-Olmstead's conclusions are not surprising. For example, half of the respondents in their survey have visited one or more cable television websites; online shopping is a quite common way to use the Internet; a significant number of respondents use the internet to plan their TV viewing; and most users first learned of the website from on-air promotional spots.[190] Several of the authors' conclusions, however, are surprising and seem to contradict what my own—clearly not social scientific—observation of Lifetime Online users' engagement with the website's enhanced viewing features would seem to suggest. For example, the authors conclude that most users do not seem to value the possibility for reciprocal communication that cable television

[188] Ha and Chan-Olmstead, 642.
[189] Mullen, 26.
[190] Ha and Chan-Olmstead, 631-634.

websites offer and indicate they will not submit comments through the website or participate in online events.[191] Similarly, relatively few users express an interest in chatrooms and message boards compared to other enhanced viewing features such as news and weather updates, online polls, TV schedules, games, quizzes, and sweepstakes.[192] "High audience involvement" features, such as chatrooms, are not a good indicator of viewer loyalty, and finally, cable television websites generally fail as "brand extensions," meaning users do not always see them as supplements to the cable television network or as comparable Internet brands.[193]

The authors point out, however, that some cable TV website features are "genre-specific" so that future research would want to focus on what enhanced viewing features "best fit the programming genres" offered by a cable TV network.[194] Indeed, it seems likely that cnn.com users would look to the website for news updates and may participate in an occasional poll but unlikely that they would shop on that site. Similarly, weather.com users would look to the website for weather updates and to participate in a sweepstakes but would be unlikely to log into a chatroom to talk about the weather with other users. On the flipside, Lifetime Online users, it seems to me, would want to engage in TV star gossip and online chat about the network's series and TV movie programming, view the evening schedule, participate in an online poll and a sweepstakes, but would not necessarily log in to get news and weather updates. Some cable channels such as CNN and the Weather Channel do not employ a narrowcast programming model; they have

[191] Ha and Chan-Olmstead, 638-639.
[192] Ha and Chan-Olmstead, 635.
[193] Ha and Chan-Olmstead, 640.
[194] Ha and Chan-Olmstead, 643.

broad appeal. As television networks with broad appeal, one would expect the traffic on their websites to be more substantial and the ways in which viewers engage with them to be quite different than the more limited users and appeal of a channel and website like Lifetime. Moreover, as I will discuss, Lifetime Online users seem to be very aware of the Lifetime brand and use the chatrooms as sites for reciprocal communication with the producers of the TV movies that they watch. This, I argue, is due to several factors, including viewer awareness of TV movie conventions, meaningful social issues, and Lifetime TV's image as facilitator of social connectivity and as a socially committed entity. Moreover, like with television, perhaps what matters is not so much how many users are using what enhanced viewing features on the Internet at any given time but the fact that the Internet exists as an arena in which new forms of social interaction can take place.

As discussed previously, online viewers who engage in the discussion of television programs can be conceived of as actively creating an "idioculture," or a network of social activity that produces "knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by an interacting group" employed in the construction of a social reality.[195] It can be argued, following Gary Fine, that "most culture elements are experienced as part of a communication system of a small group even though they may be widely known."[196] Idiocultures are meant to highlight the ways in which participants are actively engaged in

[195] Gary Alan Fine, "Small Groups and Culture Creation: The Idioculture of Little League Baseball Teams," *American Sociological Review* 44 (Oct. 1979): 734.
[196] Fine, 734.

the construction of a "social reality, a history, and sense of meaning" in a way that encourages "cohesion and commitment."[197]

Perhaps the most critical component in the construction of social reality for online audiences is, in our case, the TV movie "itself," although certainly intertextual knowledge plays a critical role in the ongoing negotiation of meaning for viewers engaged in online talk about television. Viewing the TV movie, however, is the triggering event that brings these viewers together and encourages the process of "self-selection" as members of the TV movie audience and the public personally affected by the social problems the movie examines. Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington suggest numerous ways in which viewer interaction is structured online. "Commentary," for example, consists of viewer opinions or statements about what they find satisfying and pleasurable or unsatisfying and displeasing, and it functions as both interpretation and as a form of social interaction or sharing.[198] "Speculation" is a form of gossip about the program or its intertexts that "serves to construct both cultural meaning and a bond" between viewers.[199] "Requests" and "diffusion" relate to the circulation of often extratextual information that viewers deem important in the construction of meaning and social bonds. Often evident is the "importance viewers place on information diffusion, particularly on their role as diffuser."[200]

Equally important to online viewer interaction are the types of bonds that are both discussed and forged. Common are expressions of the viewer-producer bond such as

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[197] Fine, 737.
[198] Bielby and Harrington, 85.
[199] Bielby and Harrington, 85.
[200] Bielby and Harrington, 88.

when viewers discuss their displeasure with the choices made by a TV producer.[201] Also central to online discussions of television are viewer-character bonds or the ways in which viewers perceive themselves as similar to or different from TV characters or perceive TV characters as similar to or different from "real-world people."[202] Finally, viewer-viewer bonds come into play simply as participants engage in a discussion with one another about TV. Viewers log in "for the purpose of engaging other viewers" and these online discussions "facilitate and, indeed, are organized around the viewer-viewer bond."[203]

Significantly, Bielby and Harrington point out that references to the social world in much online talk about series programming are rare. More often than not, "talk about other subjects is absent."[204] Similarly, Henry Jenkins has pointed to the absence of the social world in Usenet users' discussions about the series *Twin Peaks*. These viewers tend to emphasize the technical complexities of the program over the "emotional problems" it explores, and *Twin Peaks* can certainly be seen to share with primetime soap operas what Ien Ang refers to as a melodramatic "structure of feeling."[205] Nonetheless, the *Twin Peaks* viewers Jenkins discusses emphasize elements such as the program's textual complexities, contradictions, and incoherences—all viewed as pieces of a deliberate, gigantic, mysterious puzzle—over its social ramifications. These viewers "deflect rather

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[201] Bielby and Harrington, 90.
[202] Bielby and Harrington, 92.
[203] Bielby and Harrington, 97.
[204] Bielby and Harrington, 96.
[205] Henry Jenkins, "'Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?': alt.tv.twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery," in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to* Twin Peaks, David Lavery, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1995), 55. Ien Ang, *Watching* Dallas*: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 45.

than explore personal questions" and keep other viewers at a distance "from their emotional lives and personal experiences."[206]

Online talk about TV movies, however, is rife with references to the wider social world in part because the characters in TV movie docudramas "exist" in the social world and the textual and extratextual components of TV movies make viewers aware of that, partly because the "pedagogical function" of TV movies encourages viewers to form an opinion about the social problems they explore, and partly because viewers' own personal experiences and emotional lives are seen as useful and appropriate to the ongoing construction of social reality. I should also add "coming out" to the list of behaviors and customs that comprise the idioculture of TV movie audiences, particularly for these TV movies with their emphasis on lesbian and gay "issues." Repeatedly, viewers use these online forums as opportunities to "come out" as gay or lesbian in order simply to share an intimate detail about themselves that they see as socially meaningful in this context or to intervene from an assumed position of authority in the ongoing debates within the online discussion or the wider social world about social issues that matter to gays and lesbians.

Lifetime's 1997 TV movie, *Any Mother's Son* earned a 4.6 rating and reached an estimated 3.16 million homes at a time when Lifetime's nightly audience average was around 1.13 million households. The narrative was structured around a single, working class mother's struggle to find out how her son, Allen, was killed while stationed in Japan with the US Navy. In the course of learning about his murder, she also learns that he was gay, and becomes an unwitting leader in the political fight against the discriminatory

[206] Jenkins, "Do," 60-61.

policies regarding gays and lesbians in the military. Clearly, these ratings attest to the continued interest in docudramas, the backbone of the TV movie form, at least within the more limited context of cable TV narrowcasting. It also attests to the effectivity of Lifetime's programming strategy of airing the popular "Lifetime Original Movies" as a way of garnering a large portion of its target audience and in the process differentiating itself from other cable networks. While over 3 million viewers is certainly a respectable audience, this is not, by conventional standards at least, a TV movie blockbuster. What this discussion is meant to demonstrate, however, is the social and political significance of *Any Mother's Son* in spite of its more limited reach.

The chatroom dedicated to the discussion of *Any Mother's Son* opens with the following summary:

> Based on actual events, "Any Mother's Son," the Lifetime Original Movie shows how a quiet woman from Chicago confronted the military to prevent an attempted cover-up of the hate crime that cost her a son, and sought justice for the killers. In doing so, she came to grips with her own homophobia in learning to respect who her son was. (0)[207]

Noting that *Any Mother's Son* is a Lifetime Original Movie is an attempt to fix within the users minds Lifetime's brand and its then seemingly unique approach to narrowcasting by blending recycled network programs retrofitted to an audience of women with "quality" original TV movies. This summary also suggests how precisely within the conventions of the TV movie *Any Mother's Son* is.

[207] This forum and the individual responses are accessible in the "Lifetime Lounge," Topic Title: "Lifetime Original Movie—'Any Mother's Son,'" http://www.lifetime.tv.com/thetube/index.html. The numbers that appear in parentheses in the text identify individual posts and are taken from the original online document.

Rapping would view *Any Mother's Son* as an example of the "woman as rebel" formula in which women take on social or political causes.[208] Meehan and Byers refer to this as Lifetime's "romantic crusader" formula in which a strong and romantically-involved woman "finds herself in a situation in which she must confront the system, but always for someone else."[209] Significantly in the case of *Any Mother's Son*, however, Dorothy Hajdys (Bonnie Bedelia) is a working, single mother, with no love interest. Megan Meehan and Jackie Byers use this period on Lifetime's broadcast history and this particular TV movie formula to discuss how Lifetime's feminist-inspired programming was diluted as the network grew more successful and attracted a wider audience, yet *Any Mother's Son* is a good counter-example in regard to this argument. Still, as in the example of the "woman as rebel" formula used by Rapping, *Lois Gibbs and the Love Canal* (NBC, 1983), *Any Mother's Son* reconciles activism and motherhood, "which are seen as complementary in this narrative. She must become a public figure because she cares about her family."[210]

Also significant in this synopsis is the reference to "actual events" in an attempt to cash in on the presold nature of the audience for docudramas which take as their subject matter the controversial events covered in detail in the national press five years prior. One user writes: "I remember hearing about Allen Schindler after his brutal murder took place in 1992 . . . . I read an article about Allen and it made me cry. He did not deserve to die" (16). This viewer comes to see his or her own life story in terms of the character of

[208] Rapping, 114.
[209] Meehan and Byers, 38.
[210] Rapping, 116.

Hajdys: "Before he was killed I was a homophobic individual; this terrible murder of an innocent gay man was the first of step in changing my views." Similarly, as this user recounts, Hajdys had to learn to overcome her "bad opinion of gay people," accepting only after Allen's death that "*queers*," as Bedelia of the TV movie spits out with much contempt, "are human beings also." One commentator on the murder of Schindler notes that it had become "the most voluminously covered and politically significant gay murder" since the assassination in 1978 of openly gay city supervisor, Harvey Milk.[211] Retelling the story of the notorious Schindler murder— which was not only unprovoked but so brutal that no one could easily dismiss or justify it and which rallied individuals against the hotly debated ban on gays in the military—also functions to suggest to viewers that Lifetime is a "social agency" committed to the social and political issues that matter to its viewers.

Here, already, I think we begin to see why TV movies, docudramas in particular, matter to viewers and make an impression without the benefit of sustained identification. While documdramas are over in two hours, the events they refer to may have taken place many months or several years ago, but they were often shocking, disturbing, or socially significant enough to have continued to reverberate for that long for many of us. The TV movie acts as a vivid reminder of the "actual events" in which many viewers still have much invested and the intense emotions that were experienced at the time which, perhaps even more so in retrospect, may seem transformative. Allen's murder marked a tragic milestone for Dorothy and a major turning point for this viewer, and now, the viewer

[211] Chip Brown, "The Accidental Martyr," *Esquire* Dec. 1993: 107.

hopes that "people who watch this movie who are homophobic will change" like the viewer and Dorothy before him or her.

The commentaries in the online posts that follow focus on a number of televisual and social concerns. Viewers do not spend much time discussing or debating the TV movie's aesthetics or narrative strategies. The TV movie's formal strategies seem to almost be taken for granted. On the one hand, this may suggest the accessibility of the TV movie form that strives for clarity, coherence, and transparency with the resulting "emphasis being placed on feeling and those than on form."[212] On the other hand, it may also suggest the familiarity of the audience with TV movie convention, which while "realist" in its representational strategies, is hardly simplistic. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that viewers do practice a number of interpretive strategies. "Semantic criticism" refers to the ways in which viewers understand television's themes, messages, while "syntactic criticism" includes interpretive strategies related to representational strategies related to genre and form.[213] Whether viewers emphasize semantic or syntactic strategies—or a third type of criticism, "pragmatic"—which will be discussed more below, depends on a wide number of factors including the program being viewed and the context in which it is being discussed.

What little explicit discussion there is of the TV movie's representational strategies focuses on the ways in which the movie does not cohere or fails to achieve verisimilitude.

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[212] Rapping, 31.
[213] Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes, "On the Critical Abilities of Television Viewers," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*, Ellen Seiter, et al., eds. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 205.

> There were a couple of discrepancies that I would like to address: I understand that you cannot produce a film with military characters without having at least one detail on the uniform out of place but, calling a 1st class Petty Officer a Chief Petty Officer was just a bit much. Also, what rank was Allen Schindler? His tombstone said SA (Seaman Apprentice), the rank on his uniform was SN (Seaman), and he was referenced as Petty Officer in the trial.
>
> Sorry to be so picky. The reason that I bring this up at all is that those details bothered me a bit due to he fact that I am currently a 1st Petty Officer in the Navy. I am also gay. (14)
>
> Another subject: My husband is a retired Chief Petty Officer in the Navy and noticed that the First Class Petty Officer at the funeral was wearing a Chief Petty Officer's hat with his First Class Petty Officer's uniform. A minor technicality, I know, but my husband was livid! (31)

Of course, TV movies are filled with "inaccuracies," sometimes in the name of "dramatic license" and sometimes out of a failure to notice continuity errors. These remarks seem to point out that viewers do have limits in relation to the liberties TV movie take with social reality. This type of personal knowledge is, also, clearly a form of "cultural capital" which gives the viewer a certain authority in relation to the events being represented and a may lend credibility to their remarks. Even as the viewers apologize for the intrusion of "trivial" details into more "serious" discussions about matters of great social significance or deflect responsibility for viewing displeasure onto others, they assert their prerogative to comment on the failures of the producers from the privileged position of personal experience. Perhaps because *Any Mother's Son* has as its referent events of the social world, these details take on much significance.

Much viewer commentary focuses on the affective impact of *Any Mother's Son*:

> I absolutely loved this movie. I felt that it was very well done, and it touched me a lot and meant a lot to me. (2)
>
> This movie really moved me and I thank Lifetime for its support. (5)

> Wonderful movie. It had me crying at several parts. My thanks to Lifetime for airing it, and to Dorothy Hajdys for having the courage to tell her story. (17)
>
> I am still fighting back the tears an hour after it's over. I know you advertise your station as TV for women, but as a man, I would like to tell you that you play the best movies on TV. Again, I thank you for this evening. I wish I had a more eloquent way to express to you how much it meant to me. (18)
>
> It's been 25 minutes since the movie ended and my heart is still breaking for Allen and Dorothy. It's hard to type through the tears. (19)
>
> I watched the movie for the second time and I was just as outraged as I was the first time. . . . THANK YOU LIFETIME, MY FAVORITE CHANNEL, KEEP UP THE GREAT PROGRAMMING. (28)
>
> Very sad, very tragic. Great job, Lifetime, for bringing this to the airwaves. It's about time the truth be told so that this does not happen again. (34)

What may appear as simple and immediate emotional responses to *Any Mother's Son* are actually the effect of complex critical strategies. In semantic criticism terms, for example, one user sees the movie as exploring the theme of a mother's courage. In syntactic criticism terms, several users suggest the TV movie is a tragedy. Obviously however, the overriding characteristic of these posts is the emotional reactions users share with others online. Rapping's remark that when TV movies "work emotionally" they have the ability to stir deeply-felt affective reactions in viewers is certainly relevant here. Clearly the emotional appeal of *Any Mother's Son* impacted many viewers. Moreover, emotion here has a social dimension; commentary is not only a form of evaluation, it is a form of interaction. For Baym, one of the major benefits of online discussion groups about soap operas is that they promote "collaborative interpretation" and offer the opportunity to "negotiate personal and private socioemotional issues in a public place."[214] Unlike the participants studied by Bielby and Harrington and Jenkins,

[214] Baym, 91-92.

the Lifetime Online users who took part in this discussion share their own emotional reactions in a way that invites and encourages intimacy and attempts to forge viewer-viewer bonds. These participants are not simply alone, wallowing in the melodramatic excesses of the TV movie—although fans of melodrama almost certainly do, at times, take pleasure in precisely that. Rather, their emotional responses are the basis for connecting with other users. It also connects them to the wider social world as they reflect in the social injustices and political inequalities that elicited those responses.

Lauren Berlant uses the term "structure of political feeling" to describe the operation of a "vicious yet sentimental cultural politics" that has dominated American politics since the 1980s to the detriment of marginal groups.[215] For Berlant, "political ideas about the nation" have been supplanted by "the development of feelings about it" and "nationality has become a zone of trauma that demands political therapy."[216] She is skeptical of the importance and relevance of emotion to politics given the ways in which a "culture of imperiled privilege" has harnessed emotion in the service of an "intimate public sphere" that serves a reactionary political agenda.[217] Berlant introduces the term in the course of discussing the struggle to maintain the boundary between public and private in relation to sexuality and argues that the "national anthem" of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is nothing new.[218] The entire history of "national sentimentality" works to situate heterosexuality in a protected "zone of privacy" while simultaneously relegating

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[215] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 61, 4.
[216] Berlant, 8.
[217] Berlant, 6.
[218] Berlant, 60.

homosexuality to the position of impossibility, that which can "patriotically speaking, be neither done nor legitimately spoken of at all."[219] "Structure of political feeling," to me, could equally describe what Rapping sees as the underlying appeal of TV movies; they frame social and political issues in emotional terms in ways that resonate with their audiences.[220]

TV movies, to the degree that they are understood as simply sentimentalizing and domesticating politics, as Gitlin suggests, can be seen as emblematic of the containment of politics within the intimate public sphere which directs all public aims towards the family. Yet *Any Mother's Son*, moves its audience to feel differently. The online discussion of the TV movie reveals the ways in which it stirs viewers to understand "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" as a discriminatory policy that encourages a culture of homophobic brutality. Of course, Lifetime's strategy of encouraging arguably "oppositional" cultural politics as Tankel and Banks point out is partly behind this. Lifetime encourages viewers to go "against the grain." *Any Mother's Son* does so primarily by asking viewers to identify with the mother of the victim as she takes on the attempted U.S. Naval "cover-up" of her gay son's murder in order to vindicate him. While clearly relying on a sentimentalized notion of motherhood, a woman who loves her family and country unconditionally and will fight to protect her loved-ones no matter what the personal cost, to the degree that is seems to shift the definitions of family, public, and nation to include "homosexuality," the TV movie nonetheless opens a space

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[219] Berlant, 60.

[220] Berlant's recent work on affect is much more compelling and sympathetic to its role in politics. See this recent edited volume on compassion and politics, for example: Lauren Berlant, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

for what we might call counter-feelings in relation to the more predominant national sentimentality discussed by Berlant. I view the Lifetime Online forum more in line with Ann Cvetkovich's convincing argument regarding the "presence and promise of cultural formations that bring traumatic histories into the public sphere and use ongoing accounts of affective experience to transform our sense of what constitutes a public sphere."[221]

Viewer commentary also reveals the degree to which Lifetime viewers understand TV movies to be both entertaining and instructional while positioning Lifetime as a progressive social agent within the discussion:

> I thought this movie was very good. . . . The more we educate, the more lives we'll save. (4)
>
> I applaud Lifetime for their continued pursuit of quality movies, and encourage them to continue to enlighten people about hatred and its destructive power. . . . Again, this movie really moved me and I thank Lifetime for their support. (5)
>
> I want to thank Lifetime for believing enough in this issue to make this movie! (9)
>
> Many thanks for Lifetime's guts and courage for producing this movie! (10)
>
> Cheers to Lifetime for tackling such a controversial subject matter. . . . I hope this makes ignorant viewers aware that homophobia anyplace. . .is wrong. (11).
>
> As the mother of a gay son I am particularly disturbed by the homophobic culture in our military and our country. . . . I can only hope that quality programming such as "Any Mother's Son" will serve to educate the ignorant and raise social awareness. . . . Thanks again Lifetime!!! (13)
>
> I just want to say thank you for having the courage and compassion to create and air this movie. (18)
>
> Thank you so much for showing this movie. I have high hopes that non-gays will see themselves in one or more of the characters and make a decision about what's right and what's wrong. (22)
>
> Your organization seems to be the only one to air this type of "volatile issue" program. . . . Please continue what you're doing . . . . Thank you so much for not being pressured into NOT doing them. (23)

[221] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003), 15-16.

> I have seen this movie at least three times now and I am glad that there is a forum such as Lifetime for movies with such a sensitive topic to be aired. . . . You bravely show some tough, controversial subjects. Keep it up. And my love and prayers go out to Allen's family and his friends. He did not die in vain. (41)

These comments can best be understood by in light of Tankel and Bank's observation that Lifetime functions as an electronic space which offers viewers a sense of "social connectivity" and the "expectation of companionship" rather than simple unidirectional communication. Lifetime is viewed as an advocate, a courageous and compassionate supporter. One user clearly assigns Lifetime an active role in the shared project of eradicating homophobia by writing that the more people "we" enlighten, the more lives "we" will save. While academic critics have voiced concerns about the ideological function of TV movies, the Lifetime Online users generally see the overt attempt at "educating" and "enlightening" the audience as a marker of "quality." And like many critics and scholars, Lifetime Online users credit the cable network for offering "serious" TV movies that explore themes that the networks cannot.

Lifetime's programs and promotional spots only imply a social framework for viewing while its online chatrooms actually enable it. They also provide viewers with a direct feedback loop to the network. Bielby and Harrington consider the forging of viewer-producer bonds as significant because they point to the ways in which viewers see themselves as agents in television production practices. The overwhelmingly positive feedback Lifetime receives from these viewers attests to the successful ability of Lifetime to position Lifetime Online as a brand extension. Contrary to what the research of Ha and Chan-Olmstead suggests, these viewers are clearly aware of the connection between Lifetime TV and Lifetime Online and see them as supplemental. The gratitude viewers

express to Lifetime for its socially conscious programming is extended to the network for the equally valuable internet resources it provides. One user writes: "I would like to thank LIFETIME for producing and airing this film . . . . I would also like to thank LIFETIME for providing this forum to its viewers" (14). Ha and Chan-Olmstead also conclude that most users do not seem to value the possibility for reciprocal communication that cable television websites offer and indicate they will not submit comments through the website or participate in online events, yet those that do, clearly find personal and social value in doing so.

Speculation in Bielby and Harrington's study is understood primarily in terms of how users may gossip about characters based on intertextual information at their disposal or discuss what direction a particular plot line may take based on their knowledge of the program. Given that the users they study are discussing dramatic primetime series and daytime soap operas, TV genres which rely on plots with multi-episode story arcs and which encourage sustained identification with the characters, this is not surprising. Speculation in relation to *Any Mother's Son* is more clearly about the social world. Users speculate about the fate of Allen Schindler's killers, Terry Helvey and Charles Vins; about the roots and effects of homophobia in and out of the military; about the effect of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy adopted by the U.S. government under the Clinton administration shortly after the murder of Schindler; about the prevalence of government cover-ups; about the suffering and courage of the "real" Dorothy Hajdys.

"Pragmatic criticism" describes how a viewer is aware of watching television in relation to "her or his cognitive, affective, and social self."[222] Pragmatic criticism includes the ways in which viewers explain how and why a program "captures and occupies their imagination."[223] The responses already discussed reveal some of the ways in which users engage in pragmatic criticism. While pragmatic criticism may reveal something about the viewer's cognitive, affective, and social self, for pragmatic criticism to make sense to other viewers, those others must have a sense of who the viewer is. Much user online commentary and speculation, therefore, is preceded by a user's self-disclosure, particularly, revealing that the user is either gay or lesbian:

> I can relate to this movie because I am gay. (3)
> I know first had what it is like to be harassed for being an out homosexual. (8)
> I am currently a First Class Petty Officer in the Navy. I am also gay. (14)
> I served aboard the U.S.S. Midway from 1988 to 1996. At one time, I suffered the embarrassment of having anti-gay sentiments written about me on the wall of the bathroom. (19)
> I watched this movie with my mother. I am a gay man. (27)
> I am a lesbian and I live in constant fear of discrimination. (41)

Other users disclose that they are the parent of a gay or lesbian child or a member of the armed services. This type of self-disclosure shows how users understand their own involvement with the TV movie: it moves me because I am gay; it means something to me because my son is gay; having enlisted in the Navy I understand these types of issues. Self-disclosure online is how people reveal something about their offline selves. However, users do not simply construct online identities in relation to their offline selves,

[222] Katz and Liebes, 205.
[223] Katz and Liebes, 216.

but in relation to others with whom they interact with online through the interface provided by both TV and the Internet.[224] *Any Mother's Son* seems to encourage self-disclosure and pragmatic criticism—recall, too, the newspaper article discussed earlier in which the viewer/author restages his own coming out and encourages others to do so precisely because the TV movie—like the ritual of "coming out" itself—is understood in terms of the necessity of overcoming secrecy and integrating gay identities into society. The group discussing *Any Mother's Son* on Lifetime Online attempt to construct a group identity compatible with the TV movie's "message."

No matter how contested "coming out" as a political strategy may be for many, it has been and remains a major "rite of passage" for most gays and is a source of social agency. In her book on lesbians and cultural space, Sally Munt writes that the "narrative impetus of a 'coming-out story' is basically individualist. . . . [H]owever, closure is achieved when the newly converted lesbian finds her community."[225] During the entry of the individual lesbian into a lesbian cultural space, individualism is displaced in favor of a "communal multiple self." Meaning, coming out is a critical component of discursive group formation. Coming out shapes one's identity in relation to others. In the Lifetime Online forum, coming out provides the means to articulate how and why one relates to the TV movie and it invites user interaction and the formation of viewer-viewer bonds based on shared histories, experiences, and collective memories.

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[224] Baym, 158.
[225] Sally Munt, *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space* (Washington, D.C.: Cassell, 1998), 14.

In addition to commentary and speculation about the TV movie, Lifetime Online users use the message board for pragmatic criticism, for example, to request and disseminate information related to the program. Users ask other users when the TV movie is going to air again or ask users if they recall another TV about a particular subject. At one point, the forum moderator advises one user when she can tune in to *Any Mother's Son* again, thus reinforcing the belief that the forum is a way to engage in reciprocal communication with Lifetime TV. Significantly, the dissemination of information included the forum moderator posting a link to the Servicermembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) website where users could learn more about the issues surrounding gays and lesbians in the military, Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, and a petition intended for the Naval Parole and Clemency Board to deny Helvey parole when he came before the review board in 2002. The SLDN sponsored a public screening of *Any Mother's Son* at the Harold Washington Library in Chicago where it also distributed the petition and where Dorothy Hajdys spoke after the TV movie was aired. The SLDN also sent emails to various list-servs encouraging subscribers to watch the TV movie, hold viewer parties, and help distribute the petition and raise funds for the SLDN.

Viewers voiced their support of the SLDN petition and the organization's commitment to enlisted gays and lesbians:

> I not only signed the petition but I sent copies to my Senator & Congressman. We need to do more to protect our gay service members!!! (7)
>
> I have made 50 copies of the petition and intend to distribute it to neighbors, friends, and relatives. (13)
>
> I am signing the petition. It is the least I can do. (24)
>
> I urge everyone to sign the petition. (28)
>
> I've got many copies of Mrs. Hajdys' petition and I urge everyone, gay or not, to get copies of it and circulate it. (30)

> I wish I could give [Hajdys] her son back . . . but I can't. However I can keep getting signatures for the petition and together with these nice Lifetime viewers we're going to keep that murderer behind bars! (38)
>
> I too signed the petition and it is in the mail. Good Luck in your fight. (39)

Here again we can see the ways in which Lifetime promotes its image as social agency by aligning the network with Hajdys and with the SLDN and offering users more information on how to become socially and politically informed. However, commercial and social interests can be served simultaneously. What seems certain to me is that *Any Mother's Son* elicited viewers' socioemotional concerns in a way that encouraged them to "get involved." No matter how small the gesture of signing the SLDN petition may seem, the users of Lifetime Online were not simply disengaged from the social and political issues that *Any Mother's Son* explores after watching the TV movie.

While the TV movie may not have encouraged the type of permanent, structural social intervention that Rapping sees as politically significant in relation to a TV movie like *The Burning Bed*, neither did it simply console users with the fantasy of affective personal empowerment. Rather, the TV movie, the online forum, and other users helped shape viewers' responses in ways that I would argue are, no matter how limited, socially productive. Again, the promise of social connectivity and companionship offered by Lifetime and more dramatically materialized by Lifetime Online, is evident in this discussion of the SLDN petition. Users are engaged in understanding the TV movie and their own social world, of reshaping their identities, and forging social bonds. The viewers' posts suggest the extent to which they seek not just to enjoy the network's programming but to connect with other viewers and derive social pleasures in that. The comment, "together with this nice viewers at Lifetime," seems to sum this up nicely.

Viewer-character bonds are also formed and discussed by viewers of *Any Mother's Son* online. Some viewers describe which characters they identify with and why. Several mother's discuss their empathy for Hajdys:

> Very informative from the perspective of a gay man's mother. . . . Also, salute to Dorothy for standing up and fighting. (33)
>
> My heartfelt condolences to Dorothy Hajdys for her loss. It is a loss that I hope never to experience. (13)
>
> As difficult as it must be for her, I am thankful that we have her on our side. . . . I would like to thank Dorothy Hajdys and Lifetime for telling this story. (14)

Another user discusses how close the TV movie comes to his own experience after Allen's murder through a character who holds a vigil for Allen:

> I found myself in the character in San Diego who organized the memorial service. Hundreds of friends and I organized a vigil for Allen on a bridge in Long Beach. Allen was remembered; Dorothy was honored there, as she was in your film, for doing everything she has done. (22)

What is interesting in this discussion is the degree to which "characters" overlap with the "real" social subjects they represent. *Any Mother's Son* and Lifetime provide viewers with a connection to the actual persons represented. One viewer asks Lifetime to speak to Dorothy Hajdys on his behalf:

> Please pass along to Mrs. Hajdys that I am signing her petition and I am going to give copies to others. I would also like to ask you to pass along my gratitude to her for having the courage to share her son's story and to allow something good to come from something so horrible. (18)

Other users, such as those discussed above, submit their posts directly to Hajdys. After posts by users who identify themselves as Shone-Mark Schafer, a friend of Schindler, and Kathy, Schindler's sister, appear, responses addressed to Schindler's family become more direct. Schafer writes:

> Thank you, Lifetime, for telling Allen's story. Allen was a good friend of mine in San Diego and it was hard for me to come to terms with what happened. I must admit when I first heard about the movie a month ago, I was upset to think that this was being drudged up again. Thankfully the movie was done very well and in some ways I felt closure after watching it. My best regards for your efforts! (35)

Kathy writes:

> I would like to thank Lifetime for telling the story of Allen Schindler. I would also like to thank everyone who signed the petition and passed it on. . . . I am Allen's sister Kathy. . . . I am so glad that all of the comments have been positive. My mother wanted the story to be told because she never wants another mother to go through what she has. . . . In the last 4 1/2 years our family has learned so much, and I feel that Allen would be proud of what my mother has done, how she has fought for the rights of gays and how she fought to find out the truth. . . . Again, thank you for all of the positive support. (36).

Users respond with posts similar to this one: "Shon-Mark and Kathy, What wonderful comments from you both. Thank you for posting here. Hearing from those close to Allen really makes a big difference" (37). Of course, it can be questioned if Schindler's friend and sister actually posted here and there is no way to verify if these users are who they say they are. What is significant, however, is that prior posts anticipated their participation. Lifetime's perceived commitment to Schindler's family and their struggle and the possibility the network creates for social connectivity and companionship make these posts seem almost inevitable.

CONCLUSION

Mullen writes, "by the year 2000 the vision of cable as a narrowcast medium was being realized."[226] Increasingly, more and more cable channels are providing more

[226] Mullen, 192.

original programming to specialized audiences who are becoming increasingly accustomed to tuning to these channels because a network is perceived as fulfilling their specific entertainment and informational needs. Meanwhile "the presence of the Internet is helping shape the direction of cable" by providing a level of "interactivity cable was never able to achieve."[227] These observations have ramifications for how we view public life in the present historical moment. Public life seems no longer tied to physical locale. Television introduced the possibility of an "electronic space" that transcends physical locale and the Internet was an even more direct manifestation of this possibility. Meyrowitz argues that television undercut traditional social distinctions and social identities. TV viewers come to see themselves as a member of the "general public" in a way not previously possible. If the medium of television enables the creation of a general public, cable television, through its emphasis on narrowcasting, however, seems to insist on the importance of social differences by catering to, Mullen would say actually creating, specific groups who see themselves as socially distinct. Unlike traditional social groups, however, they are not primarily defined by a shared physical location. With the aid of TV and the Internet, these groups form their social identities through collective and collaborative viewing and interpretation strategies which often occur in virtual third places that extend further in time and space than traditional social groups. Virtual third places have come to be, for many of us, one of the fundamental ways in which we take part in public life. These Lifetime Online users I have been discussing are a primary example of this phenomenon. These users have responded to the "problem of

[227] Mullen, 192.

place" through the creative engagement with mass media. They seek out ways in which to, through television and the Internet, engage others socially. They use television and the Internet to enrich their emotional lives and express their emotional selves. Users gather in order to feel a sense of belonging and companionship while discussing issues of collective social and political importance. They form and reform identities in relation to TV movies and the social ideals that viewers come to see them as embodying. Interpretive practices such as semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic criticism are ways in which viewers personalize television programs, but within the contact of virtual third places, such strategies are collaborative. Commentary, speculation, and the diffusion of information are ways in which viewers interact with TV programs, but they also form the basis for social relationships within virtual third places. The social world may be unavoidably mediated but public life does not disappear from view.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

At times, the role of social space in media reception is not overt. Social space is only implied, yet nonetheless, discernable in interpretive practices. Take, for example, the responses of critics in the mainstream press to *Cruising*. I have argued that contrary to Will Aitken's study of the critical reception of the film, in which he asserts that the critics unanimously object to the film and the homoerotic desires it represents, something more like desire than homophobia is produced.[1] A close reading of these reviews reveals not an obvious hatred of gay men but a more complex mix of desire and disgust or fascination and fear that has become emblematic of urban sexuality.[2] This ambivalence reveals not only something about the critics' attitudes toward homoerotic desire—including their own, perhaps latent, desires—but something of the "fear of becoming lost in unmapped and unmappable body-ego-spaces," a kind of anxiety that seems to define contemporary urban placelessness.[3]

Another example of the implicit role of social space in media reception is found in the discussion of *Any Mother's Son*. The viewers do not openly discuss social space, their own or that represented within the TV movie. Nonetheless, to make sense of viewer responses to the TV movie and their use of the online chatroom to discuss it, we must consider how electronic media produce and shape public space. Specifically, Lifetime

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[1] Will Aitken, "Hips or Lips: *Cruising* and Critical Preference," *Christopher Street* 4.9 (May 1980), 58-62.
[2] Henning Bech, "Citysex: Representing Lust in Public," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 15.3-4 (1998), 215-241. Lawrence Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis," in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, David Bell and Gil Valentine, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 149-164. Pile, 184-210.
[3] Pile, 209.

has positioned itself as an advocate in the struggles for women's and gay rights, and promises its viewers the companionship of other like viewers, while encouraging them to assemble and participate in the electronic space it constructs.[4] As a virtual third place, Lifetime Online, through its use of "enhanced viewing strategies," extends that promise of companionship and the possibility of assembly and participation even further.[5] Virtual third places enable "delocalized" modes of social assembly that invite viewers to publicly engage with others in matters of common interest.[6] Virtual third spaces can be seen in many ways to emerge out of the historical phenomenon of placelessness, the reorganization of social space through the media, the increased attachment to private spaces, and the blurring of the public and the private.[7] Like the tavern culture that the cultures of virtual third places have come to resemble, television is often the "social link" between users who form social bonds in the course of engaging with each other about television.[8]

At other times, however, social space is precisely what viewers are commenting upon and attempting to understand through interpreting a media text. It seemed important to suggest how *Parting Glances* shared with other artistic responses to

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[4] Jonathan David Tankel and Jane Banks, "Lifetime Television and Women: Narrowcasting as Electronic Space," in *Voices in the Street: Explorations in Gender, Media, and Public Space*, Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert, eds. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1997), 256.

[5] Louisa Ha, "Enhanced Television Strategy Models: A study of Television Websites," *Internet Research: Electronic Applications and Policy* 12.3 (2002): 235-247

[6] Charles Soukup, "Computer-Mediated Communication as a Virtual Third Place: Building Oldenburg's Great Good Places on the World Wide Web," *New Media & Society* 8.3 (2006): 427.

[7] For more on the attachment to private space and the blurring of the public and the private, see: David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and Gary Gumpert and Susan J. Drucker, "The Demise of Privacy in a Private World: From Front Porches to Chat Rooms," *Communication Theory* 8.4 (Nov. 1998): 408-425.

[8] Reuben Buford May, "Tavern Culture and Television Viewing: The Influence of Local Viewing Culture on Patrons' Reception of Television Programs," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28.1 (Feb. 1999), 85-86.

HIV/AIDS an impulse to "write the dead—and the circumstances of their death—into the cultural narrative," along with some specific representational strategies such as the staging of the "welcome return of the dead," the preoccupation with ghosts, and the use of memorials.[9] It is not enough, however, to stop there. If these are shared meanings, it is important to point to how they became common to so many. This has to do with the centrality of mourning in gay culture in the 1980s and 1990s. The experience of tremendous loss and the practices of mourning are so pervasive in life and in art at the time that they lead to the formation of an "elegiac consciousness." Elegy voices the refusal of consolation and the desire to hold on to the dead and what they represent, which Douglas Crimp has suggested—in addition to the lives of the gay men lost to HIV/AIDS— is the "culture of sexual possibility." [10] This culture was seemingly lost to death and to the moralizing discourses about gay men and HIV/AIDS, but against these were constructed an imaginary geography of utopian sexual possibility represented so powerfully by places like Fire Island. Space is unavoidable in this discussion, given its centrality to the hegemonic and counterhegemonic understandings of HIV/AIDS as well as the interpretations of AIDS films.

I have taken issue with a number of media theorists at various junctures in this dissertation even as I find them instructive. Kyle-Patrick Hart and Eva Cherniavsky, for example, have both helped shape my understanding of AIDS films. I borrow Hart's definition of the genre of AIDS films and find his discussion of the ways in which the

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[9] Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithica: Cornell UP, 1997), 127.
[10] Douglas Crimp, *Melancholy and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 140.

genre sets urban and rural spaces in opposition compelling. Similarly, Cherniavsky's typology of AIDS films based on their "heterosexual" or "homosexual" narrative features is useful. What I object to in regard to Hart's and Cherniavsky's studies of AIDS films is not how they define the genre or the ways in which they interpret the individual films so much as what they conclude about what AIDS films "do" and whom they "work for." Hart and Cherniavsky both conclude that AIDS films inevitably reproduce heterosexist and homophobic norms to the benefit of the straight viewers who watch them and offer little or anything to gay audiences. That being the case, neither approach can account for the queer pleasures clearly taken in AIDS films and evidenced in the reception literature I have discussed, nor the importance these films have had in the development of a utopian longing that has sustained homoerotic desire and the politics of HIV/AIDS in the wake of the epidemic. It is simply not the case that AIDS films are "not for the Gay Community but about the Gay Community."[11] I want to point again to the ways in which queer viewers were able, through watching AIDS films, to recall, articulate, and relive their deeply felt experiences of love, pain, and loss in order to shape a resistant imagined geography that opposes the attempts to control, if not entirely eradicate, homoerotic desire. HIV/AIDS radically reshaped the social space of gay men. For Lefebvre, "demarcated space necessarily embraces some things and excludes others: what it rejects may be relegated to nostalgia or simply forbidden."[12] Utopian spaces are "the places of what has no place, or no longer has a place."[13] The utopian longing revealed in the

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[11] Bart Beaty, "The Syndrome is the System: A Political Reading of *Longtime Companion*," in *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992), 117.
[12] Lefebvre, 99.
[13] Lefebvre, 163.

course of interpreting the AIDS films discussed here is marked by a nostalgia for the pre-AIDS spaces of homoerotic desire (New York City, Fire Island, Philadelphia). This nostalgia cannot be equated with a withdrawal from or denial of the present. I would argue that this nostalgia made it possible to identify what about the present is lacking and point to what "can and perhaps will be."

Similarly, my own understanding of the importance of TV movies is indebted to Elayne Rapping's discussion of the form, particularly the way she addresses social issues within TV movies, audiences and affect, and her situating TV movies within the public sphere. Here, however, is also where our approaches diverge. Rapping insists that TV movies matter because they reach the widest possible audience, and they matter more if they are able to effect radical social change. Given that TV movies now cater to the "specialized interests" of cable audiences and not the mass audience of the network TV era, unless we are willing to dispense with TV movies altogether—something which both popular and academic critics have problematically implied all along—we must think about how they circulate and become meaningful in other ways.

Rapping's argument rests on the notion that the public sphere is singular and that responses to TV movies are homogeneous and undifferentiated. Thrift's observation that different spaces produce different people who think and act differently seems relevant here as a way to counter this totalizing perspective in Rapping's analysis. Still, it is possible to argue, as does Clarke, that the idea of a singular public sphere is fictive, yet

nonetheless continues to structure society and politics.[14] It seems to be more productive, however, to think of the public sphere as comprised of multiple, intersecting, competing publics located within various overlapping social spaces. Mike Crang, reflecting on the interaction between public and electronic spaces, writes:

> [T]he electropolis is not an alternate realm, but offers conjunctures of different forms of space—different electronic, physical, social, and political spaces. Running these together produces a fractured public sphere, not one of self-present individuals interacting, but the interactions themselves forming a public sphere that is necessarily incomplete.[15]

This brief passage, to me, more accurately expresses the complications and contradictions of public life, public space, and media experience than does positing a unified sphere in which media act uniformly on audiences. *Any Mother's Son* may not have radically and permanently altered social life. It did, however, reach a substantial audience, and some of those audience members formed a small, ephemeral public sphere when they logged on to Lifetime Online to share their own and others' feelings, experiences, and beliefs about the TV movie and the sociohistorical context that produced both it and them.

Textual analysis continues to be the most frequently utilized method of media analysis within queer studies.[16] Throughout this dissertation, I have occasionally set aside the text "itself" to focus on the viewers and the context of reception. At other points I have spent more time analyzing certain films more closely. In the case of

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[14] Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 1-26.
[15] Mike Crang, "Public Space, Urban Space, and Electronic Space: Would the Real City Please Stand Up?," *Urban Studies* 37.2 (2000): 313.
[16] There are many recent examples that could be cited here. Some of the most eloquent, sophisticated, insightful, and enjoyable book-length examples are: Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Cannon* (New York: Routledge, 2000); James R. Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland and Co., 2002); Robert Lang, *Masculine Interests: Homoerotics in Hollywood Films* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002); Jeffery P. Dennis, *Queering Teen Culture: All-America Boys and Same-Sex Desire in Film and Television* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006).

Cruising, I made the conscious choice not to analyze the film for two reasons. First, there have already been numerous close readings of the film, and it is uncertain to me that another—specifically, mine—could add much to our understanding of the text.[17] The same holds true for *Philadelphia* (1993).[18] "To underestimate, ignore, and diminish space," writes Lefebvre, "amounts to the overestimation of texts . . . to the point of assigning to these a monopoly on intelligibility."[19] This quote suggests the second reason for my choosing not to analyze the film; the protests against the production and distribution of *Cruising* had little if anything to do with the actual film—contrary to what Richard Bourne has argued[20]—and many interpretations—both at the time of the film's release and even now—have as much to do with the protests as they do with the film. It is in this sense that the protests against *Cruising* did not—contrary to the intentions of the protestors—censor the film. Rather, the protests had the effect of generating meanings perhaps more complex and contested than the film alone could have done. In the case of *Parting Glances* (1986), I spend a good deal of time analyzing the film, but do so in order

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[17] In addition to those discussed throughout this dissertation, see: Nancy K. Hayles and Kathryn Dorhman Rindskopf, "The Shadow of Violence," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 8.2 (1980): 2-8; Peter R. Ibarra, "Dislocating Moral Order and Social Identity in Cinematic Space: The Inverted Detective Figure in *Tightrope* and *Cruising*," *The Sociological Quarterly* 39.3 (1998): 409-433; Guy Davidson, "Contagious Relations: Simulation, Paranoia, and the Postmodern Condition in William Friedkin's *Cruising* and Felice Picano's *The Lure*," *GLQ* 11.1 (2005): 23-64.

[18] In addition to those discussed throughout this dissertation, see: Brian Carr, "*Philadelphia* and the Race of 'Brotherly Love'," *GLQ* 6.4 (2000): 530-555; Gabriele Griffin, "Conclusion: What Bodies Matter? *Philadelphia* and Beyond," in *Representations of HIV/AIDS: Visibility Blue/*s (New York: Manchester UP, 2000), 788-198; Robert J. Corber, "Nationalizing the Gay Body: AIDS and Sentimental Pedagogy in *Philadelphia*," *American Literary History* 15.1 (2003): 107-133; Charles I. Nero, "Diva Traffic and Male Bonding in Film: Teaching Opera, Learning Gender, Race, and Nation," *Camera Obscura 56* 19.2 (2004): 46-73; Brett Farmer, "The Fabulous Sublimity of Gay Diva Worship," *Camera Obscura 59* 20.2 (2005): 164-195.

[19] Lefebvre, 62.

[20] Richard Bourne, "Why Did the Film *Cruising* Lead to Protests?," Available online, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/rdb0201.doc>.

to help explain why viewers seem almost to take for granted that AIDS films are elegiac since many interpretations only hint at this but do not explore it at length.

While often compelling, informative, and able to help sharpen our own interpretive skills, unless they address the ways in which historical viewers engage, understand, and interpret film and television, textual analysis often falls short of being able to address the ways in which film and television are historically, socially, and politically significant. Staiger makes the point that not all interpretive strategies and viewing positions are available to all viewers at any given time and "what positions are possible and how individuals function in those perspectives matter."[21] Rather than trying to explain the film and television texts I have discussed throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to focus on the reception practices brought to bear on them because those perspectives matter and still seem to evade most queer media theorists. Staiger goes on to suggest that reception studies "not stop . . . at the time of the initial reception," but continue to widen "in every direction," and look at reception practices in relation to any given text diachronically.[22] The film and television texts examined here are ordered chronologically, but this analysis is not historical in the sense of examining what changes and does not change about reception practices in relation to a particular text over time. The relationship between gay men, media reception, and social space as they are each transformed over time is one possible future avenue of study.

[21] Staiger, 96.
[22] Staiger, 93.

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Vita

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